



Turun yliopisto
University of Turku

"ONCE AGAIN I GAINED SO MUCH"
- UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS
SALES INTERACTIONS FROM AN INDIVIDUAL VIEWPOINT

Sini Jokiniemi



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To Lotta

SUMMARY

“Once again I gained so much” – Understanding the value of business-to-business sales interactions from an individual viewpoint

Sales research traditionally has considered value in the form of quantitative outcomes of selling processes. Value has been scrutinized predominantly from the perspective of social exchange theory and treated as objectively determined, static outcomes becoming evident in the post-transactional context of a selling process. However, value can also be studied in the pre-transactional context by considering sales meetings as independent interaction platforms for the emergence of value. Value may be approached as a dynamic process phenomenon that entails qualitative characteristics and is subjectively perceived and used by individuals also in the pre-transactional context of a selling process.

The purpose of this research is to understand how individuals appreciate sales meetings in the context of buying and selling professional business-to-business services. The study strives to understand the nature of interaction-based value, the application of interaction-based value, and the levels and contexts of the application of value. The aim of this research is to offer a substantive grounded theory on the emergence, appreciation, and application of interaction-based value in face-to-face sales meetings.

The data-driven grounded theory was produced based on the premises of symbolic interactionism and the methodology of constructivist grounded theory. The dyadic data mainly consist of audio recordings of eight sales meetings and 20 individual interviews with salespeople and customer representatives who participated in the sales meetings.

The constructed grounded theory offers interaction-based value as unfolding through particular value spaces. The unfolding of interaction-based value comprises three interrelated processes (the emergence, appreciation, and application) that occur both in the exclusive and shared value spaces (personal, relational, and corporate). Interaction-based value emerges on the basis of interpersonal interaction in a shared and relational context. Value appreciation takes place in an exclusive context at a personal level and results in six forms of interaction-based value. Based on the dynamic and processual nature of interaction-based value, value may be applied through 17 value application processes in both shared and exclusive value spaces. The data imply that value

temporally extends to forthcoming sales meetings and the entire selling process. It also extends to the business relationship, as well as to the contexts of the respective companies, their customers and partner networks.

The study contributes to personal selling and to the value research within the discipline of marketing. The study offers a holistic and novel perspective on sales meetings as independent value sources that offer value in a readily usable form during the longer selling process. Although the concept of value has been eagerly discussed, it has remained as an empirically under-developed entity. The study extends academic understanding of subjectively indicated value by offering novel concepts based on individuals' everyday thinking and perceptions. It diversifies the understanding of individually perceived value and its usage in the perceiver's own settings offering a fresh view on sales meetings. The central elements of the grounded theory shed new light on the impact and possibilities a single sales meeting can offer for different beneficiaries: individuals, members of the selling process, and involved buying and selling companies and their networks.

The results offer a subjective perspective on value as a process phenomenon that is present in the pre-transactional context and unfolds via individuals, even to the level of companies. Interaction-based value is also dynamic as it transforms within the process of emergence, appreciation, and application as individuals guide their actions and act upon value in a way that is suitable for them.

The contemporary compensatory thinking regards value as perceived value or a net benefit. However, value can be scrutinized as an independent phenomenon. Based on the research interviews, the forms of interaction-based value and the accompanying value application processes were entirely based on value as such – and not diminished or reduced by sacrifices.

This study challenges the prevailing notion of sales meetings as merely costs that bring value for the inputs made only if the sales meetings lead to a sale. Sales meetings offer value for the participating individuals and for the companies via the individuals already during the selling process, which broadens the value focus in sales research. This change of perspective moves the sales discipline into the realm of a broader value-based way of thinking and underscores the strategic role of the sales force. This means also that sales management is challenged to acknowledge the wide-ranging impact of a single sales meeting, to broaden its horizons from the end of the sales pipeline to cover the full business landscape.

Keywords: personal selling; sales research; value; interaction-based value; interpersonal interaction; symbolic interactionism; constructivist grounded theory; sales meeting; professional services

TIIVISTELMÄ

"Jälleen kerran sain niin paljon" – arvon ymmärtäminen yritysten välisessä myyntitapaamisessa yksilön näkökulmasta

Myynnin tutkimuksessa arvoa on perinteisesti lähestytty myyntiprosessin kvantitatiivisten lopputulosten näkökulmasta. Arvoa on tutkittu sosiaalisen vaihdannan teorian näkökulmasta ja pidetty objektiivisesti määritettynä ja staattisena lopputuloksena, joka todentuu transaktion jälkeen. Arvoa voidaan kuitenkin tutkia myös transaktiota edeltävässä kontekstissa tarkastelemalla myyntitapaamisia itsenäisinä vuorovaikutuksen tiloina, joissa syntyy arvoa. Arvoa voidaan lähestyä dynaamisena ja prosessuaalisena ilmiönä, joka sisältää laadullisia ulottuvuuksia, määritetty subjektiivisesti ja jota yksilöt voivat hyödyntää jo kauppaa edeltävissä vaiheissa.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus on ymmärtää, miten yksilöt arvostavat myyntitapaamisia, jotka tapahtuvat osana asiantuntijapalveluiden ostamista ja myymistä yritysten välillä. Tutkimus pyrkii ymmärtämään vuorovaikutukseen pohjautuvan arvon luonnetta, arvon hyödyntämistä sekä niitä tasoja ja konteksteja, joissa arvoa hyödynnetään. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on rakentaa aineistolähtöinen teoria vuorovaikutukseen pohjautuvan arvon syntymisestä, arvostamisesta ja hyödyntämisestä kasvokkain tapahtuvien myyntitapaamisten pohjalta. Aineisto on luonteeltaan molemminpuolinen ja koostuu pääasiassa kahdeksan myyntitapaamisen ääninauhoituksista sekä 20 henkilökohtaisesta haastattelusta myyntitapaamisiin osallistuneiden myyjien ja ostajien kanssa. Aineiston analysoinnissa yhdistyvät sekä konstruktivistisen aineistolähtöisen teorian metodologia että symbolinen interaktionismi.

Tutkimuksessa rakennettu aineistolähtöinen teoria esittää vuorovaikutukseen pohjautuvan arvon arvotilojen kautta laajentuvana ilmiönä. Vuorovaikutukseen pohjautuva arvo todentuu kolmessa yhteenliittyvässä prosessissa (arvon syntyminen, arvostaminen ja hyödyntäminen) sekä erillisissä että jaetuissa arvotiloissa (henkilökohtainen, liikesuhde, yritys). Vuorovaikutukseen pohjautuva arvo syntyy jaetussa arvotilassa liikesuhteen tasolla. Tämän arvon arvostaminen tapahtuu erillisessä arvotilassa henkilökohtaisella tasolla ja todentuu kuutena erilaisena arvon muotona. Arvon dynaamisen ja prosessuaalisen luonteen johdosta yksilöt voivat hyödyntää arvoa 17 erilaisen arvon hyötyprosessin myötä sekä erillisissä että jaetuissa arvotiloissa. Aineisto osoittaa, että vuorovaikutukseen pohjautuva arvo voi ulottua ajallisesti tuleviin myyntitapaamisiin tai koko myyntiprosessiin. Se voi myös ulottua liikesuhte-

seen tai myös kummankin yrityksen omiin erillisiin prosesseihin, aina yritysten muihin asiakkaisiin ja yhteistyöverkostoihin asti.

Tutkimus luo uutta tietoa myynnin tutkimukseen sekä markkinoinnin arvotutkimukseen. Tutkimus tarjoaa holistisen ja samalla uudenlaisen näkökulman myyntiprosessiin liittyviin myyntitapaamisiin, jotka voivat toimia itsenäisinä arvon lähteinä ja joissa syntyy arvoa myös välittömästi hyödynnettävissä olevassa muodossa. Vaikka arvon käsitteestä on paljon keskusteltu, sen empiirinen tutkimus on ollut vähäistä. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen kontribuutio laajentaakin akateemista ymmärrystä subjektiivisesti määritetystä arvosta tarjoamalla uusia käsitteitä, jotka pohjaavat yksilöiden arkiajatteluun ja näkökulmiin. Tutkimus monipuolistaa ymmärrystä yksilön määrittämisestä arvosta sekä arvon käyttämisestä yksilön omissa yhteyksissä. Tutkimus tarjoaa lisäksi tuoreen näkökulman myyntitapaamisten tutkimiseen ja ymmärtämiseen. Aineistolähtöisen teorian keskeiset elementit valottavat yksittäisen myyntitapaamisen vaikutusta ja sen tarjoamia mahdollisuuksia useille eri hyödynsaajille; yksilöille, yrityksille sekä näiden verkostoille. Prosessuaalisesti ilmenevä arvo näyttäytyy myös vaihdantaa edeltävissä vaiheissa ja laajentuu yksilöiden kautta yritysten tasolle; näin ollen yksilötasolla koettu arvo välittyy osaksi yritystasolla kumuloituvaa arvoa. Arvo voidaan ymmärtää myös dynaamisena ilmiönä, joka muuntuu arvon syntymisen, arvostamisen ja hyödyntämisen myötä, kun yksilöt ohjaavat toimintaansa ja hyödyntävät arvoa heille sopivimmalla tavalla.

Markkinoinnin arvotutkimuksessa vallitseva kompensoiva ajattelu lähestyy arvoa nettoarvona, josta on vähennetty arvon saavuttamiseksi tehdyt uhraukset. Arvoa voidaan kuitenkin tutkia myös itsenäisenä ilmiönä. Haastateltujen henkilöiden näkökulmasta vuorovaikutukseen pohjautuvan arvon eri muodot ja näihin liittyvät arvon hyödyntämisprosessit perustuivat arvoon sellaisenaan; arvoon, josta ei oltu vähennetty, tai johon ei liittynyt, uhrauksia.

Tutkimus haastaa nykykäsityksen myyntitapaamisista kuluerinä, jotka tuottavat arvoa vain, mikäli tapaamiset johtavat kauppaan. Myyntitapaamisia voi kuitenkin tarkastella myös arvonäkökulmasta, jolloin niiden nähdään tarjoavan yksilöille sekä yksilöiden kautta heidän edustamilleen yrityksille arvoa jo myyntiprosessin aikana. Tämä lähestymistapa laajentaa myyntitutkimuksen näkemystä arvosta, suuntaa myynnin tutkimusta yhä laajenevaan arvoon pohjautuvaan ajatteluun sekä korostaa myyntihenkilöstön strategista roolia. Myynnin johdon tulisikin tunnistaa ja tunnustaa yksittäistenkin myyntitapaamisten laajalle ulottuvat vaikutukset sekä laajentaa kapeahkoa näkökulmaansa myyntiputken lopputuloksista kattamaan koko laajan liiketoimintaympäristön.

Asiasanat: henkilökohtainen myyntityö; myynnin tutkimus; arvo; vuorovaikutukseen pohjautuva arvo; vuorovaikutus; symbolinen interaktionismi; konstruktivistinen aineistolähtöinen teoria; myyntitapaamiset; asiantuntijapalvelut

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During the fall of 2008 I felt strongly that I wanted to challenge myself. For some peculiar reason the challenge took the form of a PhD project. In order to diminish my performance anxiety, I thought of all those who had defended their theses before me. I reasoned that a PhD is an achievable goal for human beings in general, and being a human being myself, I might also survive the process. After five years of intense study, this human being is ready to hand over her ideas and findings to the scrutiny of the academic community and business audience. I could never have guessed how much I would gain from the research process in addition to receiving the diploma in the end.

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Espoo, 15th August 2014

Sini Jokiniemi

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1 INTRODUCTION

*“Drop a pebble in the water: just a splash, and it is gone;
But there's half-a-hundred ripples circling on and on and on,
Spreading, spreading from the center, flowing on out to the sea.
And there is no way of telling where the end is going to be.”*

(James W. Foley; verses 1–4)

A selling process connects a selling company and a buying company. In practice, the selling process consists of several sales meetings. However, the selling and buying *companies* as such do not participate in these sales meetings. In the actual sales meetings the companies are represented by particular *individuals*: by salespersons and by customer representatives.

One sales meeting may be scheduled for Monday morning, the next one for Thursday three weeks after, and the third one might take place after the holiday season. In between the sales meetings, the salesperson's daily routines continue: he meets with other potential buying companies, participates in, for example, service development work-shops, and makes plans for the next quarter. The customer representative, on her behalf, may meet with other potential selling companies with suggestions on how to tackle one of her company's problems. The customer representative may also participate in the planning of the company strategy and prepare presentations for the board of executives. Both the salesperson and the customer representative meet with their colleagues at work, participate various meetings and seminars, discuss things with their supervisors, exchange thoughts with professionals in their networks, go home after work, and make preparations for their child's birthday.

The salesperson and the customer representative appreciate various things in life. They may also appreciate certain aspects of their mutual meetings and long-standing business relationships. As individuals, they both look at things from their own individual perspectives and may differ in what they appreciate.

For example, 'a relationship' might carry diverging meanings for the salesperson and for the customer representative who are nonetheless sharing and involved in the same relationship. For the salesperson, the relationship might be seen as a burden because he has not been able to sell a wider range of solutions to the customer. The stagnated situation has frustrated the salesperson for a long time. In addition, the salesperson does not like talking with the

customer representative because the salesperson himself is a fast-moving person, and the customer representative prefers doing everything with a slow tempo, which irritates the salesperson. The customer representative, on his behalf, appreciates the relationship and finds it very satisfying. Everything has been going very smoothly and steadily for a long time, and the chats with the salesperson offer a nice opportunity for the customer representative to hear news from the market. After their last meeting, the customer representative was feeling good and went to the local tennis club to enjoy the sun and have a drink on the terrace. To the customer representative's surprise, he saw the salesperson there playing tennis – in a very aggressive manner.

For the selling company, the long-standing relationship in this example has provided a steady flow of profits and sales volume. From the buying company's view, doing business with the selling company has ensured that two of their main processes have been operating well. However, during the salesperson's annual appraisal discussion, the salesperson makes a confession to his supervisor. Although the salesperson has learned to be more patient with other customers based on his experiences with this laid-back customer, he is struggling in finding a way to show that he can really do more for the customer. The salesperson brings up several examples of trying to convince the customer. The salesperson's supervisor is impressed with the innovative ways the salesperson has portrayed the selling company's solutions to the customer.

At a different time and place, the customer representative meets a former colleague at a trade fair. The customer representative mentions to the ex-colleague that she often meets with a certain salesperson who has almost become almost her mentor. The salesperson often shares exciting insights and ideas with the customer representative. The former colleague asks whether the customer representative has tried out any of the new ideas suggested by the salesperson. This simple question gets the customer representative thinking – perhaps she should step up and suggest the improvements regarding process Y to his supervisor.

The next day, the customer representative discusses the ideas regarding process Y with his supervisor, who immediately wants to move forward with the ideas. However, the supervisor has a competing candidate in mind for providing the new services for process Y. Eventually, the competing candidate wins the deal. Thus, from the original selling company's point of view, the selling process in relation to process Y ends up bringing no profit. There was no sale. However, the buying company – on its behalf – now has process Y running well and has found new customers on the basis of its improved service. The customer representative is encouraged by daring to suggest new insights to his supervisor and is grateful to the salesperson for the inspiration. Business is going well in the buying company. Turning to the selling

company, although it lost a deal, did it gain anything? The salesperson has adopted a new style and is dealing with customers in a more patient manner, which is already visible in the growing number of offers he is making. The salesperson is now also more aware of the daily challenges facing businesses that operate in the same field as the buying company. The salesperson is relieved that the burden of the slow-moving relationship is off his shoulders. Since the salesperson's supervisor learned about the salesperson's unique way of offering the company's solutions to customers, the selling company is now running a state-of-the-art training program for all its salespersons based on the salesperson's insights.

As the above, imaginary example shows, when the selling process is seen from the viewpoint of the companies versus from the viewpoint of the individuals, the understanding and appreciation of the same situation may be very different. Each of the actors appreciates various things in relation to the selling process. In addition, the example indicates that results other than simply sales may be appreciated.

Let us come back to reality and relate to a phase in my recent work life. When I was working as a Customer Relationship Manager for a financial company in 2008, I developed concepts and process models for the company's Key Account Managers. These models offered guidelines for Key Account Managers to conduct their daily customer activities in a more unified fashion in the competitive market environment. Even as the most state-of-the-art concepts and services might be rivaled by competitors one day, I was wondering whether there would be any advantages left that would not be so easily copied or commoditized by competitors.

Since Key Account Managers and their customers are unique human beings, so are their mutual interactions. Therefore, I started to wonder whether sales meetings – as such – could stand out as competitive advantages? What did I need to understand about sales meetings in order to present them as sources of business advantage? Is there something that occurs in sales meetings that is appreciated by customers? What has been going on when "the customer would have been willing to pay for the conversation itself" (Dixon and Adamson 2011, 51)? Could the salespersons also appreciate something they get out of the interaction? And eventually, could the selling and buying companies, as well, somehow become beneficiaries of the value that has emerged through sales meetings?

Therefore, the basis for this study was formed by a series of pragmatic questions. In order to understand the individual perspectives on gains more fully, this research delves into how individuals in business – the salesperson and the customer representative – interpret sales meetings and the value related to them.

1.1 Contemporary research interest in value in sales and marketing

The changing scene of business is described in service-dominant logic in the following way: “Times have changed. The focus is shifting away from tangibles and toward intangibles, such as skills, information, and knowledge, and toward interactivity, and connectivity and ongoing relationships” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 15). The transforming business landscape sets new requirements and opportunities for, for example, value creation and the new strategic role of the sales function (Johnston and Peters 2011).

Since the turn of the new millennium, marketing research has intensively focused on understanding and examining the concepts of value and value creation (for reviews, see e.g. Lindgreen, Hingley, Grant and Morgan, 2012; Lindgreen and Wynstra, 2005; Payne and Holt, 2001). This research interest has been entering business-to-business sales research during the last few years. Inspired by, for example, service-based views on value (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004), the sales function’s strategically important and integrated role in the creation of value for the customer has been recently studied (Barber and Tietje, 2008; Baumann and Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2013; Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos and Sager, 2012; Bradford et al., 2010; Chonko and Jones 2011; Cravens, LeMeunier-FitzHugh and Piercy 2011; Haas, Snehota and Corsaro, 2012; Johnston and Peters, 2011; Storbacka, Ryals, Davies and Nenonen, 2009; Sullivan, Peterson and Krishnan, 2012). Moreover, the pivotal role of the salesforce in the creation of value has been supported with conceptualizations of value-based selling (see e.g. Anderson, Kumar and Narus 2007; Kaario, Pennanen, Storbacka and Mäkinen 2004; Rackham and DeVincentis 1999; Terho, Haas, Eggert and Ulaga, 2012).

Nowadays sales organizations are regarded as more than just tactical resources for the execution of strategy (Piercy and Lane 2011). Sales organizations are considered increasingly as “a strategic resource and capability of the firm” (Leigh, Cron, Baldauf and Grossenbacher 2011, 491) that play an important part in implementing a company’s value orientation (Baumann and Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2013; Terho et al., 2012). Therefore, instead of being only communicators of value, salespersons can create customer value on an ongoing basis (Hunter and Perreault, 2007; Johnston and Peters 2011; Manning, Reece and Ahearne 2010).

In line with the recent research focus on the creation of value in relation to personal selling efforts, selling has been redefined from a value perspective:

“Sales is the phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals/organizations in order to bring about economic exchange within a value-creation context” (Dixon and Tanner, 2012, 9).

This definition underscores the strategic role of interpersonal interaction at the individual level as the basis for the emergence of value (Baumann and Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2013; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). It is a highly topical interest to understand value both theoretically and empirically more thoroughly from the individual level of business interactions and personal selling (Hohenschwert, 2012; Terho et al., 2012). Support for understanding the individual level is based on the fact that companies do not act; companies do not greet each other, shake hands, engage in workshops, negotiate, sign contracts, or make referrals. In contrast, the individuals who represent the companies do act, and it is the individuals' ongoing interaction and the resulting interaction-based value that forms the basis for any business deal.

Companies are challenged to understand the processes in which customers create and perceive value and how companies may support those processes (Wikström and Normann 1994). When a selling company properly understands its customers' value processes and possesses a strong value creation competence (Sullivan et al., 2012), the company is able to generate new leads and achieve better hit ratios and organizational goals (Menon, Homburg and Beutin, 2005; Sullivan et al., 2012), make more accurate management decisions (Graf and Maas, 2008), increase profits, and succeed (Flint, Woodruff and Gardial, 2002; Flint, Blocker and Boutin, 2011; Lapierre, 2000; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006) as well as benefit the most from relationships with customers (Walter, Ritter and Gemünden, 2001). Customer satisfaction and loyalty are also strengthened based on successful value facilitation for the customers (Avlonitis and Panagopoulos, 2010; Blocker et al., 2012; Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008; Terho et al., 2012). Moreover, Berthon and John (2006) have argued that, from this point forward, companies need to find their competitiveness in interactive elements since the noninteractive elements are fast becoming commoditized. In addition, the quality of interpersonal interactions "is rapidly becoming the sole remaining basis of competitive advantage" (Rayport and Jaworski 2005, 2).

Despite the ever-broadening research interest in value, extant knowledge on everyday interactions in relation to the emergence of value is still lacking (Echeverri & Skålen, 2011; Salomonson, Åberg and Allwood, 2012), and not much is known about the interpersonal value processes that accompany company-level value processes (Baumann and Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2013; Bhagat, 2009; Celuch, Bantham and Kasouf, 2006; Kale and Barnes, 1992; Terho et al., 2012). This is rather surprising as the importance of value and its creation is largely acknowledged as a strategically important phenomenon in sales research (e.g. Avlonitis and Panagopoulos, 2010; Blocker et al., 2012; Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Flaherty and Pappas, 2009; Geiger and Guenzi, 2009; Storbacka et al., 2009; Terho et al., 2012). Research examining

customer value has tended to focus on the firm level as opposed to boundary-spanning salespersons (Schwepker, 2013; Blocker et al., 2012). These research efforts focus at the often impersonal macro-levels of inter-firm business relationships and may overlook essential activities taking place at the more subjectively understood micro-levels (Niculescu, Payne and Krishnan, 2013).

In sales research, there is a lack of both conceptual and empirical studies in understanding how individuals perceive and use value in business-to-business settings (Baumann and Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2013; Corsaro and Snehota, 2010; Salomonson et al., 2012). However, dyadic interaction and the emergence of value at the individual level affects the failures and successes of business relationships, but the roots of these effects have not been examined in full (Berthon and John 2006; Wilson and Jantrania, 1994). Individual sales meetings have been approached, rather one-sidedly, as elements that dominantly consume scarce resources. Research efforts have neglected the flip-side of the coin and therefore ignored the value sales meetings may “yield”. Therefore, the scrutiny of ordinary, everyday interactions may offer intriguing perspectives on the understanding of value more fully and from a novel viewpoint.

1.2 Problematising the understanding of value in sales research

Traditionally, the sale and the final outcomes generated by selling processes have stood for the ‘value’ in selling. Sales research has typically focused on explaining and evaluating these outcomes as quantitatively measured end-results of sales pipelines (Anderson and Oliver, 1987; Cravens, Ingram, LaForge and Young, 1993; Walker et al. 1979). This notion of value is, however, not self-evident. It can be problematized from the following four perspectives.

First, from a temporal aspect, the outcomes of selling processes do not generally become evident until a sale has been closed and the selling process has been completed. Therefore, the value of selling is unambiguously subordinate to the making of a sale and the transaction of money. In general, marketing research has focused on understanding value in these post-transactional contexts (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Value is generally tied to the usage of a product or service and to its delivery, implementation, and after-sales support as well as to ongoing interactional processes and relationships (Lapierre, 2000; Lindgreen et al., 2012; Menon et al., 2005; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). However, value may also be considered as emerging in a readily usable form in the pre-transactional phase of the selling process. In the pre-transactional context, value is related to elements other than the product, and

thus value may differ in nature in comparison to value that is related to the product in the post-transactional context.

Second, sales outcomes as the 'value' of selling processes are generally objectively determined. Sales volume, market share, net profits, and the number of new orders are elements that can be easily estimated and evaluated by computer software. In addition, these objectively evaluated elements are considered from a limited perspective as they "represent value for the selling company, not to the buying company" (Rackham and DeVincentis 1999). In sum, as a contemporary means of calculating value sales volumes represent value in its objectively estimated form with a limited perspective. In comparison, based on the established understanding in marketing research, value is invariably a matter of subjective definition (see e.g. Grönroos, 2011; Lapierre, 1997). As Vargo and Lusch (2008a, 7) define it: "value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary". Therefore, value may be understood from the subjective viewpoint of an individual as the perceiver of value. This notion opens up the possibility to consider the salesperson as well as the customer representative as the beneficiaries of value in addition to the selling and buying companies (cf. Baumann and Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2013). As the salesperson is generally given the role of a value creator and facilitator for the customer, the salesperson's potential role as a beneficiary of value in the sales settings has been neglected.

Third, the traditional outcomes of selling processes are overwhelmingly quantitative in nature in the form of numbers and currency (Anderson and Oliver, 1987; Jackson, Schlacter, Bridges and Gallan, 2010; Onyemah and Anderson, 2009). These evaluation bases commonly include, for example, sales volume in dollars, market share per quota, number of new accounts, net profit dollars, number of orders secured, number of calls per account, selling expense, number of customer complaints, and customer satisfaction (Jackson et al., 2010). However, it has been suggested that selling companies may capture "noneconomic, strategic value from customers" (Blocker et al., 2012, 20). This implies that selling companies might benefit also in a more qualitative manner from cooperating with buying companies. These qualitative aspects have thus far been overlooked.

Fourth, value in the form of an end-result or outcome of the selling process characterizes value as a static entity. In this post-transactional context, selling companies receive value in terms of money and sales volumes. On their behalf, buying companies receive value more or less as an entity given by selling companies to buying companies; buying companies receive products and services that have been embedded with value by the selling companies (Johnston and Peters 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In general, marketing research has mainly analyzed value as a state rather than as an entity

possessing a dynamic and processual nature (Grönroos and Helle, 2010; Woodruff and Flint 2006). As Lefaix-Durand and Kozak (2010, 130–131) argue, “value is not an absolute or a given, but it is constructed by individuals as part of the process of exchange”. Studying value from a processual viewpoint connects value to various contexts, times, and places besides the temporal boundaries of the selling process and the specific business relationship. Moreover, the dynamic nature of value underscores its transforming nature as it may be perceived in various ways depending on the perceiving individual and the context in which the individual acts.

In a summary, sales research has traditionally considered value in the form of quantitative outcomes of selling processes. Value has been treated in the form of static outcomes and regarded as objectively determined only in the post-transactional context of a selling process. However, in contrast to the prevailing research interests and perspectives on value in sales research, value can also be studied as a dynamic process phenomenon. Value can also entail qualitative characteristics and be subjectively perceived and used by individuals also in the pre-transactional context. Therefore, the scope of beneficiaries in relation to sales meetings may involve salespersons, customer representatives, selling companies and buying companies.

1.3 The purpose of the study

The *purpose* of this research is to understand how individuals appreciate and apply interaction-based value in business-to-business sales meetings.

In order to attain the purpose of the research, *three questions* are posed:

- What is the nature of interaction-based value?
- How do individuals apply interaction-based value?
- What are the levels and contexts for the application of interaction-based value?

More specifically, I pursue an understanding of what kind of interaction-based value individuals perceive in relation to interpersonal interaction in sales meetings. I also ask how individuals apply interaction-based value to understand what kind of processes start unfolding on the basis of value that an individual has perceived. Finally, I look to understand the levels and contexts where interaction-based value is used. Value that is perceived in relation to customer–salesperson interaction is a fundamental element to be understood as, in a parallel fashion, “the customer–salesperson interaction is fundamental to all businesses” (Williams and Spiro, 1985, 440).

Interaction-based value is studied in relation to sales meetings in the wider context of selling and buying of professional business-to-business services.

Specifically, face-to-face interaction in sales meetings is regarded as a platform where individuals perceive interaction-based value (Grönroos and Voima, 2012). In a business-to-business marketing setting, dyadic interaction at the micro-level facilitates as well as hinders the failures and successes of many firm-level activities (Andersen and Kumar, 2006). In other words, the prosperity of companies is affected by business relationships at the level of individual activities (Celuch et al., 2006).

This study challenges the prevailing notion of sales meetings as merely costs that bring value for the inputs made only if the sales meetings are part of a successful selling process. The costs and inputs relate to the limited resources of both salespeople and customer representatives as required inputs for a working sales meeting, namely: invested time and effort in the form of finding out relevant information before the meeting, peer discussions, preparing the material for the meeting, travelling, calendar adjustments, writing memos etc. In general, these investments and the individual sales meetings are seen worthy only if the sales meetings are part of a selling process that ultimately leads to a successful sale. The value related to a sales meeting continues to be seen as dependent on a successful longitudinal selling process, which is evident once the selling process reaches the end of the sales pipeline. However, companies may not need to consider the inputs made into a sales meeting as going more or less to waste if the selling process itself does not lead to a sale. One way or another, even individual sales meetings may be worth the effort and compensate for the inputs. In addition to considering sales meetings as draining resources, sales meetings can also be regarded from a value perspective, offering value in a readily usable form for the participating individuals and for the companies via the individuals. As well as aiming for a successful sale, the value embedded in and related to individual sales meetings also remains an untapped potential for the selling and buying companies to benefit from.

The *aim* of this research is to offer a substantive grounded theory on the emergence, appreciation, and application of interaction-based value in business-to-business sales meetings from the viewpoint of individuals. The new grounded theory is produced based on the premises of symbolic interactionism and the methodology of constructivist grounded theory. The expected theoretical contribution extends academic understanding of subjectively indicated value by offering novel concepts based on individuals' everyday thinking and perceptions. The theoretical framework offers individually perceived value as a process that eventually crosses the borders of a particular selling process as well as a particular business relationship and affects the individual's actions in various contexts both during and after a certain sales meeting.

Symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Mead 1932) provides a suitable perspective for genuinely understanding how individuals perceive interaction-based value in relation to sales meetings. The emergent interaction-based value of sales meetings can only be understood from an individual, subjective perspective as interaction-based value results from interaction between individuals. Symbolic interactionism starts the process of understanding from within, from the subjective viewpoint of an individual (Charon 2010). By applying the perspective of symbolic interactionism, this study thrives to offer a novel perspective on individually perceived value in sales settings.

This study contributes to personal selling and also to the value research within the discipline of marketing. First, the focus of this study is the interpersonal interaction between a salesperson and a customer representative in a sales meeting, which, as a content area, belongs to the field of personal selling. More specifically, research on personal selling and sales management together constitute sales research within the discipline of marketing (cf. Plouffe, Williams and Wachner, 2008). The study offers a novel and holistic perspective on sales meetings as independent value sources that take place during the longer selling process. The study considers all participants of the sales meeting – both salespersons and customer representatives – as beneficiaries of value from their own subjective viewpoint. Second, the study offers an empirically challenged understanding of individually perceived value to contemporary value research, which, otherwise takes place often at a rather abstract and theoretical level of reasoning. Value is also studied as an independent phenomenon in this study. It is understood as such and not contrasted to or diminished by inputs or sacrifices. Moreover, this study offers an understanding that is based on individuals' subjective perceptions and use of value in their own contexts before, during, and after the sales meeting. Therefore, this study diversifies the understanding of individually perceived value and its usage in the perceiver's own settings in a parallel fashion with, for example, customer-dominant logic (Heinonen, Strandvik, Mickelsson, Edvarsson, Sundström and Andersson, 2010).

More specifically, this research is linked to interaction studies in the field of sales (e.g. Boorum, Goolsby and Ramsey, 1998; Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993; Spiro, Perreault and Reynolds, 1977; Williams and Spiro, 1985; Williams, Spiro and Fine, 1990) and to selling orientation studies (e.g. Anderson et al., 2007; Liu and Leach, 2001; Sawhney 2006; Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Sheth, 1976; Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Terho et al., 2012; Weitz, 1981; Weitz, Sujaan and Sujaan, 1986). I will review interaction and selling orientation studies for understanding how contemporary research views interaction, value, and their connections at the level of the salesperson and the customer representative. By reviewing value studies within sales research (e.g. Anderson and

Narus, 1998; Baumann and LeMeunier-Fitzhugh, 2013; Blocker et al., 2012; Chonko and Jones 2011; Flint et al., 2002; Johnston and Peters 2011; Storbacka et al., 2009; Terho et al., 2012), I look into the perspectives that have guided research efforts on value. For constructing an overall understanding of the concept of value in general, I relate to seminal research streams in marketing: value studies in business-to-business contexts (Lapierre, 1997; 2000; Menon et al., 2005; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006) and service-based views on value (Grönroos, 2008; 2011; Grönroos and Voima, 2012; Lusch and Vargo 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008a; 2008b).

Based on grounded theory guidelines, I examine the extant literature for two reasons: first, to explore how personal selling studies consider interpersonal interaction, value, and their relations and second, to examine and relate the findings of this study to relevant personal selling studies. The focus of the study is also related to value research within the discipline of marketing. Therefore, I consider personal selling studies as situated within the larger framework of value studies in marketing and review value studies for positioning this study in relation to larger marketing discussions.

As for delimitations, the general marketing literature on value that is applied in this study is limited to the business-to-business context. This choice is in line with the nature of the research setting that comprises business-to-business meetings. Moreover, this study does not relate to organizational purchasing literature. Although the empirical setting and the resulting grounded theory are based on a dyadic perspective, the reviewed literature and the application of the grounded theory in this report focuses on relevant studies in personal selling literature and the viewpoint of the salesperson and selling company.

1.4 Research design

The study adopts a qualitative, constructivist grounded theory approach on sales meetings, starts inductively, and arrives at data-driven results. The data are collected in relation to matched dyadic settings, and both sides of the dyad are examined with equal effort. In other words, both salespersons' and customer representatives' perspectives are considered in relation to a particular sales meeting. The constructed understanding is based mainly on audio recordings of sales meetings and individual interviews with participants of the sales meetings in the context of selling business-to-business professional services.

For the research context of this study, *symbolic interactionism* (Blumer 1969; Mead 1932) provides a methodological-theoretical tool for deepening

the understanding of value as a subjectively appointed 'entity'. Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective (Charmaz 2006), a school of thought within social psychology (Charon 2010). Symbolic interactionism portrays society as a fluid, continually unfolding and changing process that is too complex and dense to be fully understood (Rock 1979). The starting point for constructing an understanding is the individual – a salesperson or a customer representative – and his thoughts and emotions in relation to a sales meeting. Within the framework of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Mead 1932), an individual is always free to choose what various elements in a situation mean for him. An individual may define and determine things from his own perspective at all times. The individual is not restricted by socially pre-defined meanings that various objects – concrete or abstract – might carry because meanings are only labels attached to the objects, and labels can be easily changed (Blumer 1969). Meanings are not built into objects or inherently embedded in them; meanings are defined by the one who acknowledges the objects.

Symbolic interaction involves an active individual who understands and interprets actions and thinks before acting (Blumer 1969). Based on the humanistic view of man, individuals are active and free to decide what they think is, for example, important and meaningful to them (Charon 2010). Individuals act upon situations by considering their feelings, thoughts, choice of perspectives, and the actions they would like to take based on the present situation (Blumer 1969). This is to contrast the more passive recipient of value to the active appreciator and applier of value. Therefore, symbolic interactionism may be contrasted with the exchange view of marketing that is based on social exchange theory (Homans 1974).

As an approach, *grounded theory* is most suitable for studying previously un-researched areas (Suddaby, 2006). In particular, complex social interactions and processes can be understood by applying the methods of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Turley and Geiger, 2006). When the researcher aims to understand the world from the viewpoints of individuals, novel insights and new perspectives can be opened up with the guidelines of grounded theory (Goulding, 2005). The combination of symbolic interactionism and grounded theory comprise a strong "theory-methods package" (Charmaz 2006, 134).

Grounded theory provides a methodology for arriving at a theory from analyzing data. Grounded theorists do not use a priori assumptions or logical deduction, nor is their research confirmatory in nature (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Miles and Huberman 1994). The methodology provides a suitable approach for an exploratory study that aims at understanding a previously unresearched area. The seminal book by Glaser and Strauss (1967) – *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* – carries the most characteristic feature of

grounded theory in its title. Grounded theory is always a discovery; at the beginning of a study, it is never known where the voyage will eventually take the researcher. An explorative study starts with a broad focus that gets narrower throughout the study (Blumer 1969). This data-driven and inductive approach sets the tone for the whole research project.

The data were gathered in relation to eight sales meetings or, in other words, eight *matched dyads*. A dyadic research setting comprising both parties of the meeting offers insights from both the selling and the buying companies and their representatives, both of whom are actively present in the sales meeting and affect it (Román and Iacobucci, 2010). The dyadic view also underscores that the focus of the research attention is the interaction between the participants (Henneberg, Pardo, Mouzas and Naudé, 2009) and the interests of both parties (Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1996) that are affected by the relational interaction they are involved in. The matched dyads narrow the research focus to specific interaction situations and named interacting people and help the researcher in research interviews in capturing the interviewees' views on these specific meetings instead of evoking the interviewees' experiences on a general level. Matched dyadic studies are scarce (Holmlund, 2004), although they have the potential to help researchers build a more holistic and better-informed understanding as the views of both participants of a particular interaction event are incorporated (Barnes, Naudé and Michell, 2007; Rajamma, Zolfagharian and Pelton, 2011). Interpersonal interaction always requires the participation of at least two individuals. The sole perspective of either the salesperson or the customer may not provide a comprehensive understanding of interaction-based value (cf. Woodruff and Flint, 2006).

The data include audio-recordings of eight sales meetings, summaries of the audio-recordings, and 20 individual interviews with salespersons and customer representatives who participated in the sales meetings. The data also include field notes, analytical memos, and five additional interviews to validate the emerging understanding.

Business-to-business professional services provide the context for the study. The selling companies that participated in the study offer Human Resource Development (HRD) services, whereas the buying companies represent various industries. HRD services are related to the training, development, and learning of the personnel, such as leadership and culture development, competence management, talent programs, and management training. In this service-based business context, the core of business is about relational interactions (Sieg, Fischer, Walling and von Krogh, 2012). With the absence of a concrete product, the focus of sales meetings in this context is on the interaction between individuals. An interaction-intensive setting is ideal for studying interaction-based value.

Choosing professional services as the research context reflects the growing knowledge-intensity in modern markets (Avlonitis and Panagopoulos, 2010). According to Plouffe et al. (2008; see also Cravens 2011), as only a minor amount of research attention has been paid to services-based business contexts, it is time sales research joined the ever-broadening solution-based, servitization-dominated business contexts.

In sum, the choice of this particular research design follows the call of Plouffe et al. (2008). The authors have argued that the methodological choices of sales researchers have relied too heavily on survey-based data. Therefore, qualitative methods have been scarcely applied. In addition, the extant studies have typically not included a dyadic perspective, and especially the customer's side as an informant has been neglected (Plouffe et al., 2008). The authors also encourage sales researchers to link their research to the wider challenges and strategic concerns of companies (Plouffe et al., 2008). In a parallel fashion, I have conducted a qualitative study with a dyadic perspective. Moreover, the contribution of this study offers insights for companies in understanding the previously untapped potential of interaction-based value in relation to sales meetings.

1.5 Research process

The research process has started inductively and continued abductively (Charmaz 2006). The research has its origins in a practical interest and uses empirically gathered data as a basis for constructing an understanding and eventually offering a theory (Figure 1).

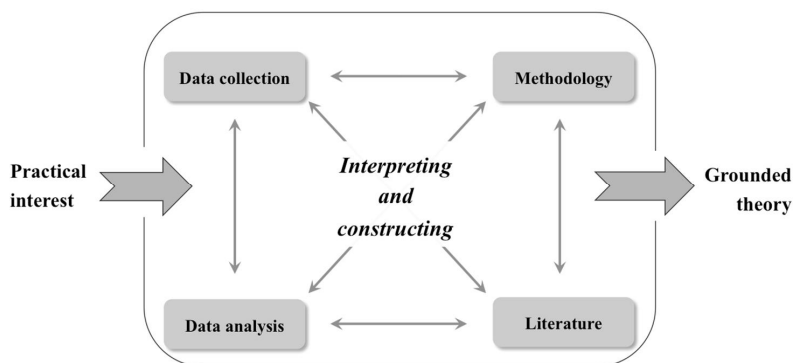


Figure 1 The research process.

As shown in Figure 1 I started my fieldwork inspired by a practical interest, which is typical of a grounded study (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The empirical interest of considering sales meetings as competitive advantages guided me when I started this research project. I also had some orienting ideas in the beginning as is common in qualitative research in general (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Miles and Huberman 1994). The orienting ideas represented "a departure for developing, rather than limiting ... ideas; a place to start, not to end" (Charmaz 2006, 17). I was curious to find out what sales meetings had to offer in terms of their value as competitive advantages.

It is recommended to postpone a thorough literature review when applying the grounded theory approach (Goulding, 2005) as a grounded theory does not test existing theories; on the contrary, it attempts to genuinely see the world from the eyes of the individuals participating a certain activity. The researcher should have an open mind when meeting individuals and starting to understand their interpretations. If the researcher is overwhelmed with extant concepts, it might obstruct fresh and innovative thinking. The researcher might also implicitly try to apply certain existing categories or concepts (external to the data) on the data while analyzing them (Charmaz 2006). By postponing the literature review, the emerging understanding, rather than existing theories, is guiding the research process (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008).

However, it is naturally inevitable that the researcher is eventually able to position his research in a focal research area, to identify a research gap, and offer a contribution to knowledge as well as relate the constructed theory in the discussions, interests, and findings in the area (Charmaz 2006).

The constant interplay between the methodological approach, insights from data collection and analysis, and extant literature inform each other all along the research process. All these different elements help the researcher to ask various theoretical, methodological, and analytical questions of himself in the course of the process as well as to compare emerging insights (Charmaz 2006). Together, the elements provide a framework for the study, assist in delimiting the study, and facilitate in focusing the research towards an intensive core – the heart of the research project (Charmaz 2006).

By studying how individuals appreciate and apply interaction-based value in relation to sales meetings, I will eventually construct a grounded theory to illuminate the patterns related to the phenomenon (cf. Charmaz 2006).

1.6 Key concepts and limitations

In this study, *sales meetings* are regarded as "face-to-face, business-related interaction events between a customer representative and a salesperson during

the course of a selling process” (Jokiniemi and Halinen, 2011). A sales meeting is an interaction event between two or more people. In business practice, a sales meeting usually lasts from 60 to 90 minutes and takes place at the buying company’s premises. Within a certain time frame, interconnected sales meetings eventually make up the selling process. The *selling process* is defined as a set of activities and events primarily conducted by the seller’s sales force with the aim of business engagement with the buyer (building on Viio 2011, 68¹). A successful selling process might mark the start or continuation of a prospering relationship, or it might remain a one-time random buy-and-sell transaction. Specifically, the selling process can be regarded as a sales cycle and the sales meeting as a discrete sales call (Plouffe, Holmes and Beuk, 2013). This study focuses on understanding value in relation to single sales meetings. Therefore, although a selling process might comprise, for example, five sales meetings, I focus my attention on only one of those five meetings. With regard to the whole selling process, I have restricted attention to meetings that take place prior to the buying company’s decision-making.

Throughout this study, the following terminology is used: *salespersons* are individuals representing *selling companies* and *customer representatives* are individuals representing *buying companies*. This choice of vocabulary helps in identifying the level referred to: individual or corporate. For example, the words ‘buyer’ and ‘seller’ are often used in sales research; however, studies are often not explicit regarding whether they refer to individuals or companies. It is important to consider the salespersons and the customer representatives as individuals who represent their companies. Salespersons and customers are business representatives who act on behalf of a company in their professional roles, have responsibilities set by the company, have received training for their particular area of expertise, and have authority in given issues (Briggs and Grisaffe, 2010; Haytko, 2004). Although the business representatives are individuals, their business roles are not to be confused with their roles as independent consumers.

In this study, *interaction* is defined as overt and covert actions² within and between individuals in relation to a sales meeting. In the spirit of symbolic interactionism, *value* is approached and defined as “a subjective, appreciative interpretation of an object” (Jokiniemi and Halinen, 2012). These subjectively

¹ Original definition: “A set of activities and events primarily conducted by the seller’s sales force during relationship initiation, with the aim of business engagement with the buyer or prospective customer” (Viio 2011, 68).

² According to symbolic interactionism, everything and anything an individual does is called an act (Charon 2010). Acts form actions that are either overt actions (observable by others, for example, talking and gesturing) or covert actions (unobservable by others, for example, mind-action and internal communication) (Blumer 1969).

appreciated objects³ may be concrete or abstract in nature. In other words, anything a person notices can be of value for that person. Value is an entity that may incorporate several value properties. The understanding of *appreciation* adheres to the following definition: "appreciating something (e.g. an event, person, behavior, object) involves noticing and acknowledging its value and meaning and feeling a positive emotional connection to it" (Adler and Fagley 2005, 79). People differ in their capacity to be appreciative: some people take things for granted and consider themselves somehow as automatically entitled, whereas others notice acts of kindness, are thankful for everyday events, and acknowledge what other people do for them (Adler and Fagley, 2005). As a term, value appreciation is closest to perceiving value. Perceiving value implies that an individual indicates something of value from his subjective viewpoint. In contrast, value estimation generally refers to measuring value from an objective viewpoint.

I consider value as emerging based on interaction and use the concept of *value emergence*. Therefore, value is not approached as an entity that is (co-) created (see e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Lusch and Vargo 2006; Grönroos, 2008). Value research within marketing has predominantly viewed value as the result of an active creation process where the participants of the creation are more or less aware of being involved in the process of creating value. The participants are therefore considered to behave intentionally in the pursuit of creating value. The verb 'to create' implies that something takes place as a result of someone's active and conscious actions. In contrast, in this study, value is considered to emerge instead of being co-created (see also Voima, Heinonen and Strandvik, 2010).

In contrast to most business-to-business studies, in this study, value is taken as an independent entity. I approach value in its own right; in order for value to be appreciated and acted upon, it does not have to be contrasted to sacrifices. Therefore, I do not regard value as perceived value (e.g. Anderson and Narus, 1998; Menon et al., 2005; Raval and Grönroos, 1996; Slater and Narver, 2000; Ulaga and Eggert, 2005; Walter et al., 2001). Perceived value is generally understood as a calculation between benefits and sacrifices, and it implies that people are able and willing to compare benefits and sacrifices in order to find out the net value of something. Traditionally perceived value or net value means that sacrifices (e.g. time, money) diminish the total amount of value that comprises benefits (e.g. lowered costs, information) (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006; Wilson, 1995) although the concept is becoming more loosely used. As a matter of fact, scholars diverge in their views as to whether or not benefits and sacrifices are correlated (Graf and Maas, 2008). When individual

³ *Object* belongs to the vocabulary of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969).

value perceptions are analyzed more deeply, benefits and sacrifices may not be so quantifiable and directly comparable to make up mathematical equations of perceived value (Graf and Maas, 2008). Since value is regarded as a phenomenon of its own right, sacrifices are not included in the analysis of interaction-based value in this study.

Moreover, *value application* refers to the various ways an individual further uses various forms of value the individual himself has appreciated in relation to a sales meeting.

Interaction-based value is a sensitizing concept (Blumer 1969). Sensitizing concepts differ from definitive concepts in that they “merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954, 7). I have applied the sensitizing concept of interaction-based value as a tool to start working with the studied action⁴ in relation to sales meetings. I aim to gradually understand the processes and characteristics related to sales meetings in order to find out more about how individuals appreciate and apply interaction-based value (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1978).

The word *gain* is used as a word in plain English to discuss the characteristics and nature of value in relation to analyzing the data. Gain was also used in research interviews in order to avoid the connotative burdens related to the word value. The word ‘gain’ is consistently used for two purposes. Firstly, ‘a gain’ serves as a noun representing any appreciated object or anything interpreted as valuable by an individual. Secondly, ‘to gain’ serves as a verb representing an individual indicating something the individual appreciates.

1.7 The structure of the report

The structure of this report follows the conventional chronological sequences of a thesis report. However, this traditional order conforms to a logico-deductive organization as it begins with theory and moves to the empirical realm (Charmaz 2006). The inductive logic of grounded theory occurs in the reverse order, starting strongly from the empirical context, rising to the level of a theory, and finally connecting the constructed theory to relevant literature and research streams. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to follow the reader-friendly, traditional flow of chapters in this report (cf. Suddaby, 2006). I want to underscore that this flow does not match the chronological order of actions in the research process.

⁴ By studied action (Charmaz 2006, 151), I refer to the empirical data I have gathered and studied; the data consist of individuals’ actions and their actions with others in the context of the selling and buying of business-to-business professional services.

In chapter one – *Introduction* – I have laid the foundation for the research project and problematized the contemporary understanding of value in sales research. I pursue an original contribution in the form of a substantive grounded theory that entails a novel and deep understanding of how individuals appreciate and apply interaction-based value.

In chapter two – *Symbolic interactionism as a meta-framework* – I offer the perspective of symbolic interactionism and discuss its epistemological and ontological considerations. The meta-framework of symbolic interactionism sets the tone for the whole study. I offer a definition of value in line with symbolic interactionism and compare the definition to the prevailing understanding of value in sales and marketing research.

In chapter three – *Personal selling and interaction-based value* – I review the sales interaction and selling orientation literature to build a more detailed understanding of the relationship between value and interaction in a sales meeting. I scrutinize the salesperson and the customer representative as an interacting dyad and seek to understand interaction-based value from the perspective of studies on value drivers in the pre-transactional context of selling processes.

The methodology of constructivist grounded theory is described in detail in chapter four. I will thoroughly describe the process of data collection together with reflecting my thoughts and remarks during the collection. In the second section of the chapter, I provide a detailed view of the process of data analysis. The process of data analysis is described on a general level; this description provides a logic and framework that I then apply in practice in chapters five and six.

In chapter five – *Analyzing the data* – I analyze and compare salespersons' and customer representatives' interpretations of gains and construct forms of interaction-based value, value application processes, and the related levels and contexts with rich, authentic quotations. The chapter answers the research questions posed in the study.

In chapter six – *A grounded theory on interaction-based value* – I guide the reader through the construction of a grounded theory. By theorizing on the research results, I leverage the level of analysis to a theoretical and abstract level and offer a substantive grounded theory. The theory is the aim of this study.

The last chapter – *Discussion* – incorporates the whole study and discusses the results and contribution of the research. In the last chapter, I theorize on interaction-based value, deliberate the conclusions of the research, and relate the findings of the study to relevant discussions in sales research. Managerial implications of the study are also discussed. I conclude the chapter by evaluating the results and considering potential avenues for further research.

2 SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AS A META-FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

The choice of a certain research philosophy defines how a researcher may gain and offer new knowledge (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). The philosophical position offers an all-encompassing perspective for the whole study and determines the direction for examining the research question, beginning with the report's introduction and continuing through to the conclusions. This research is committed to symbolic interactionism as a research philosophy. Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective (Charmaz 2006) and school within the field of social psychology (Charon 2010). Symbolic interactionism is "a sociology which portrays society as fluid and often unknowable" (Rock 1979, xii). Symbolic interactionism is interested in the common elements of everyday life; that is to say, in things that are constantly present (Dewey 1932). Interaction is the basic unit of study in symbolic interactionism (Charon 2010).

A research philosophy can be approached and understood by the key concepts of ontology and epistemology. Ontology answers "What is there in the world?" (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008, 12), while epistemology answers "What is knowledge and what are the sources and limits of knowledge?" (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008, 12).

From the *ontological viewpoint*, symbolic interactionism regards reality as subjective and socially constructed. For symbolic interactionists, there are three realities. First, there exists a physical objective reality in which individuals live that is independent of individuals' definitions (Charon 2010). Therefore, this reality, or "situation as it exists" (Charon 2010, 43) cannot be directly known. Second, there is a social reality. Through social interaction, individuals continuously interpret and define different situations (Blumer 1969). These definitions may be modified as situations, other individuals, and contexts change. Therefore, individuals constantly define the social reality they live in while interacting with other individuals. Third, through social, emotional, and cognitive processes, every individual creates his own reality (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). This means that each human being lives in a unique reality and senses the world from within that reality (Charon 2010). Moreover, in a social situation an individual's definitions always stand in between the individual and the other person; thus, "we do not respond to people but to our definitions of them" (Rock 1979, 82). Therefore, the

individual is not guided by the immediate reality; rather, the individual is guided by his own definitions of reality.

As for *the epistemological viewpoint*, symbolic interactionism belongs to the philosophical position of postpositivism. Symbolic interactionism was originally developed as a criticism of positivism. In contrast to positivists' claims, postpositivists argue that "the knower and the known cannot be separated" (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008, 19). Symbolic interactionism is also associated with subjectivism (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). Knowledge is regarded as possible only through individuals as social actors (Blumer 1969; Rock 1979). As reality and truth are always seen through a certain perspective, reality and truth cannot be completely known (Charon 2010). Therefore, knowledge represents a limited and partial way of understanding reality, as opposed to the whole truth itself (Charon 2010).

Rock (1979) describes symbolic interactionism from a methodological perspective. Symbolic interactionists start from praxis and aim to finally offer a rather artistic and sympathetic portrayal of the studied action. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes being sensitive and aware of an individual's everyday life and how the individual defines the reality surrounding him. In the view of symbolic interactionism, if the world was forced into overly strict analytic boxes, some central features of the flow and integrity of life would be lost. When symbolic interactionists describe and understand social life, they aim to stay true to the original situation, to offer whole and undivided perspectives, and to strive for authenticity (Rock 1979).

I begin this chapter by analyzing the main premises of symbolic interactionism. I continue by comparing symbolic interactionism to social exchange theory as the prevailing foundation for marketing studies. I conclude the chapter by scrutinizing perspectives on value in marketing studies and offer a definition of value based on symbolic interactionism.

2.1 The root images of symbolic interactionism

One of the most seminal writers in symbolic interactionism is George Herbert Mead (Charon 2010). The work of Mead has been further interpreted and developed by other sociologists, most notably by one of Mead's students, Herbert Blumer. It was actually Blumer (1969) who coined the title 'symbolic interactionism' to describe Mead's thinking. Mead (1932) himself called his thinking social behaviorism.

Mead's work was informed by the following three perspectives: pragmatism, Darwin's theory of evolution, and behaviorism (Charon 2010). These three perspectives capture the essence of symbolic interactionism. Blumer

(1969, 6) describes these basic ideas as root images that represent how “symbolic interactionism views human society and conduct”.

First, *the pragmatist influence* underscores the individual as an interpreter of one’s environment, a believer based on an object’s applicability in a given situation, a selective perceiver of useful objects, and an actor involved with thinking and decision-making (Charon 2010).

Second, Mead regarded the human as differing from other species by its capability to reason, talk, and act back on and adjust to its environment (Charon 2010). Mead posited *the human as a social animal*, part of the naturalistic evolution in a universe that represents a constant dynamic process. Furthermore, Mead regarded the human as being in a constant state of flux, observing that “the individual is a dynamic changing actor, never becoming anything but always in the state of becoming, unfolding, and acting” (Charon 2010, 33). In the view of symbolic interactionism, nothing is considered as fixed or stable; on the contrary, the human plays an active role in the evolution of the environment and in the ongoing evolution of his own being.

Third, in line with *behaviorism*, Mead stressed the human as a doer or an actor who constructs his own action. Moreover, these interactions guide the individual’s further actions (Blumer 1969). Mead differed from other behaviorists by arguing that it is not enough to observe overt actions (physical, observable behaviors). Covert actions that occur within an individual – thinking or mind action – need to be considered as well (Charon 2010).

In order to build a sound philosophical foundation for the study, I will describe the central elements of symbolic interactionism in more detail. I will next delineate the following four intertwined elements: perspectives and roles; interaction, action, and acts; meanings, self, and actor; and taking the role of the other.

An individual always defines and interprets reality through a certain *perspective*, what one might call “an angle on reality” (Charon 2010, 4). Perspectives are frameworks that offer restricted views of reality and guide the individual’s attention to certain activities and subsequently guide the individual’s actions (Charon 2010). What an individual sees in a situation is a slice of reality framed by a certain perspective. Therefore, every individual is aware of a different kind of reality (Rock 1979).

Each person can only be occupied with one perspective at a time. An individual’s perspectives change as the individual moves through his life. Alongside this gradual evolution, an individual’s perspectives change across situations as well. These quick changes of perspective relate to individuals’ different *roles* in different situations. For example, I am a mother, a daughter, a wife, a student, a manager, a neighbor, or a dog owner. Depending on the

context, I use the perspective or change between perspectives that suit the role I occupy in a given situation.

Various perspectives offer various views of reality. Therefore, the interpretation of a certain situation varies between two individuals who have been observing the same situation. Thus, there are at least as many interpretations of a situation as there are individuals observing the situation.

Action and *act* are central concepts in symbolic interactionism. Everything and anything an individual does is called an act (Charon 2010). Acts form action, and life itself is regarded as ‘a stream of action’ (Charon 2010, 115). From the viewpoint of symbolic interactionism, action-related terminology describes human group life since ‘it exists in action’ (Blumer 1969, 6).

Social interaction means that “actors take one another into account, symbolically communicate to one another, and interpret each other’s actions” (Charon 2010, 138). When individuals interact, they are mostly engaged in symbolic interactions. Shared symbols connect individuals and make a meaningful conversation possible. However, when an individual responds directly to the action of another individual and does not engage himself in the process of interpretation, the action is non-symbolic. Habits, reflex responses, and subconscious actions are examples of these actions (Blumer 1969). These kinds of responses do not require mind action and are therefore not considered symbolic interaction. Mind action characterizes human beings, and it is through mind action that individuals define what they encounter in situations and decide how to act based on their definitions (Blumer 1969). Through mind action, an individual determines things by their use and decides how to act toward the objects.

According to symbolic interactionism, an individual acts back on its environment, is influenced by interactions, and exists in many dynamic societies (Charon 2010). Individuals interact with other individuals, actively – although often subconsciously – define the moments they live through, and allow these definitions to influence their actions (Charon 2010).

Central to symbolic interactionism is the view on how *meanings* are formed. As Blumer (1969) underscores, meaning is not an intrinsic property of a thing or the result of the interplay of psychological elements (e.g. emotions, ideas, id, and ego) within an individual’s psyche. Instead, meanings are formed in the process of social interaction. Therefore, any meaning is a social product. In addition to interaction between individuals, social interaction may also take place within the individual himself as the individual as an *actor* communicates to himself. Meanings arise from the way the individual intends to act and acts towards objects (Blumer 1969).

When an individual uses a specific meaning, he is engaged in a two-fold interpretative process, also called self-indication (Blumer 1969). Firstly, the

individual communicates with himself about things he has noticed. The individual gives meanings to things based on his assessments of them. Secondly, the individual handles meanings based on the present situation and the direction of the actions he is to take. In other words, the individual “decides to act on the basis of the meaning” (Blumer 1969, 81). When the individual is engaged in the process of interpretation, the resulting action is symbolic.

Symbolic interactionism views an individual as consisting of an actor and a *self*. The individual is an actor that can act upon himself while engaged in mind action (Blumer 1969). Within the process of mind action or thinking, the individual and the self have separate roles: the individual or actor does the talking, and the self is the listener, the object of talking; “talking to self with symbols is what the symbolic interactionist means by thinking” (Charon 2010, 78).

More specifically, the self is an object for the actor in the actor’s internal environment. In comparison, other individuals are objects that the actor acts toward in the external environment. Since the self is a social object, the self is defined as the actor in interaction with other people. Therefore, the self is not stable or fixed; it is constantly redefined through social interaction. The self can even be labeled as a process rather than a state (Blumer 1969). When self is seen as a social object, the actor is free to choose which sides of the self he will use in each situation. The actor is also able to get outside of himself and to objectively observe the self: “I am happy”; “I must look like a fool”.

Imagination allows individuals to *take the role of the other person* (Blumer 1969). While imagining, the individual may intermittently put aside his own perspective and imagine the situation from the perspective of another person. However, taking the role of the other is more than just a change of perspective. Any perspective is accompanied with the particular individual’s symbols (Blumer 1969). Thus, when attempting to occupy the standpoint of another person, one needs not only to change the perspective, for example, from a prisoner to a guard but also to understand reality from the guard’s perspective with the guard’s unique symbols. Is the prisoner a cruel criminal to the guard or a fellow citizen who has made mistakes in his life? It is impossible to perfectly understand the reality from another person’s standpoint. The higher the degree of emotional intelligence, the closer one may get to taking the role of the other and the smaller the risk of misunderstanding others (Charon 2010).

Also, I, as a researcher, aim to take on the roles of salesperson and of customer representative in this study. I try to understand action from the perspective of the actor, namely the individual (Charon 2010). To understand human interaction means adapting the perspective of the actor and learning about the actor’s definition of the present (Charon 2010).

The present is highlighted in symbolic interactionism (Charon 2010). Individuals are regarded as thinking beings that define and act in present situations. The present – rather than the future or the past – and the definitions of the present drive individuals' decisions and acts (Murphy 1932). Moreover, the past and the future do not exist as independent entities; they are always related to a particular present. The past of this present is different than the past or the future of the present that is yet to become.

2.2 Symbolic interactionism and marketing thought

Traditionally, the selling process has been understood as a series of steps performed in a predetermined order as offered in the selling formula (Cash and Crissy 1964) and the seven steps of selling (Dubinsky, 1980/1981). The predetermined steps offer a sequence of activities along which the salesperson “attempts to influence a customer to purchase his/her product” (Weitz, 1981, 89). When selling is regarded in this manner as a linear, straightforward and goal-focused process, it may well be objectively analyzed and predicted from the perspective of social exchange theory.

Social exchange theory has been widely used in the discipline of marketing (Lambe, Wittmann and Spekman, 2001), especially in business-to-business research (Briggs and Grisaffe, 2010). Social exchange theory has been applied as a “theoretical explanatory mechanism” explaining exchanges and relational interdependence in business-to business relations (Lambe et al., 2001, 1). Overall, “marketing is the discipline of exchange behavior” (Bagozzi, 1975, 39).

According to social exchange theory, exchange is social behavior related to direct and indirect exchanges of tangible, intangible, and symbolic resources (Bagozzi, 1975). Foa and Foa (1974) have categorized these resources into six types: love, status, information, money, goods, and services. The exchange of these resources will eventually result in terms of rewards (see also Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). These rewards may be economic, for example, money and social/socioemotional, such as satisfaction and personal advantage (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Lambe et al., 2001). For example, The motivation and intention of relational parties to enter and stay in relationships is explained by the expected rewards that the relationship will offer (Lambe et al., 2001).

In order to understand the differences between symbolic interactionism and the prevailing notion of social exchange theory in marketing research, the theories can be examined from the viewpoint of four selected premises. These

premises are: the subject area of study, ontological and epistemological considerations, the view of man, and the rule of reciprocity.

Both symbolic interactionism and social exchange theory are interested in what goes on between people. However, the differences between symbolic interactionism and social exchange theory are evident already in their names: the *subject area of study* for symbolic interactionism is interaction between and within interacting individuals, whereas social exchange theory focuses on the exchange of objects between people. According to social exchange theory, any interaction between people is always an exchange of resources (Homans, 1958).

As for the *ontological and epistemological considerations*, symbolic interactionist studies have their starting point in the individual as a subject. Symbolic interactionism is interested in the individual's particular world of objects and considers individuals as the sole source of knowledge (Charmaz 2006; Charon 2010). According to social exchange theory, individuals are predominantly considered as objects whose behavior can be explained and predicted by studying individuals' explicit behavior (Homans 1974; Thompson and Evans, 1969).

Symbolic interactionism's *view of man* is that of an actor who individually defines and adapts to the environment and constructs his own action based on his situational goals. The symbolic interactionist view stresses the individual as a constructor of his action based on what he encounters in a situation (Blumer 1969). The nature of an individual or the outside environment and the changes in it do not shape or control the individual's behavior. Instead, human beings adjust to the environment by understanding and acting towards it based on their dynamic definitions about it (Charon, 2010). The human being is an acting organism who decides whether an object in his environment is an object for him and whether it represents a 'stimulus' for doing something of his choice.

Social exchange tradition draws from classic economic theory and has adapted the idea of *Homo economicus*, the man as a rational decision-maker (Gergen, Greenberg and Willis 1980), and underscores the stimulus-response effect (Homans 1974). For a person, any object or action of another person represents a stimulus. This stimulus causes a certain response – a predefined behavior or a reflexive reaction – in the person. However, besides this view of economic man engaging in utilitarian exchange, social exchange tradition in marketing has also suggested the view of a marketing man engaging in both utilitarian and symbolic exchange (Bagozzi, 1975). The marketing man strives for both economic and symbolic rewards and moves between the extremes of being rational/irrational, having complete/incomplete information, and maximizing/settling for profits (Bagozzi, 1975).

According to social exchange theory thinking, exchange processes are guided by *the rule of reciprocity* (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Reciprocity has been defined as "a social interaction where movement of one party evokes a compensating movement in some other party" (Houston and Gassenheimer, 1987, 11). Therefore, interactions generate obligations that need to be recompensated (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Lambe et al., 2001). People do not want to become indebted, and, through the process of reciprocity, people exchange to reach an equilibrium of exchanges (Homans, 1958; Jacobs, Evans, Kleine and Landry, 2001). Therefore, social exchange theory focuses on the partially causal and reciprocal behavior of people. In addition, according to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005, 883) "individuals return the benefits they receive" either directly to the giver or to another party (see also Bagozzi, 1975). Thus, the individual is positioned in a secondary place and considered as a transit point through which exchange entities and accompanying outcomes travel.

In comparison, the concept of reciprocity is unknown to symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism aims to understand how individuals define their present realities through cognitive and emotional processes. Individuals are driven by their own definitions of the present social reality and act according to their situational goals (Blumer 1969). Symbolic interactionists focus first and foremost on the individual as a subject and aim to understand his world of objects in the present situation. This is to underscore that past events and potential obligations for recompensations do not automatically accompany the individual and guide his actions.

As for transactional and relational considerations, social exchange theory highlights longitudinal relational exchange in a relationship context (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987). This temporal focus neglects the importance of short-term interactions that may remain as transactional or evolve into relationships. In comparison, symbolic interactionism stresses the present moment and interpretations of even discrete events. Moreover, as social exchange theory underscores "systems of social and economic relationships" (Bagozzi, 1975, 34), it stays at the aggregate level of people instead of moving to the level of an individual.

To sum up, symbolic interactionism focuses on the interacting individual who is the only source of knowledge. The individual is considered as constructing his own actions based on his interpretations and situational goals. In addition, the individual is not viewed as being automatically obligated to recompensate the deeds of others; in other words, the individual is not bounded by the rules of reciprocity. As symbolic interactionism has been rarely applied in marketing research, it may offer a different kind of interpretation and

understanding of sales meetings and selling processes than social exchange theory and therefore extend contemporary knowledge.

2.3 The concept of value in marketing

Overall, value can be regarded as an elusive concept that is complex, although important to understand in marketing research (Grönroos, 2011; Woodall, 2003). In contemporary industrial marketing studies, both suppliers and customers are more or less implicitly considered to behave intentionally and rather rationally in pursuit of the most value. They are also regarded as being able to make comparisons between various forms of value (see e.g. Anderson and Narus, 1998; Anderson, Narus, and van Rossum, 2006; Liu and Leach, 2001; Terho et al., 2012). This perspective – the exchange view of marketing – is based on social exchange theory. It underscores the behavior of homo economicus in its pursuit towards intentional and active creation and facilitation of value.

However, the understanding of value becomes somewhat different when approached from the perspective of service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) and service-logic (Grönroos, 2008). These two rather recent logics offer a service-based view of value within the discipline of marketing and provide a middle-ground for understanding value in comparison with social exchange theory and symbolic interactionism. *Service* – as in service-based view of value – denotes a perspective on benefiting another with one's resources in comparison to services as intangible outputs of production processes (Lusch and Vargo 2006).

Next, I will examine the concept of value from the following viewpoints: the emergence of value, value determination, value as a phenomenon, the comparability of value, and the temporal contexts for the use of value. I analyze each of the viewpoints from three angles: from the perspectives of industrial marketing studies that apply social exchange theorist notions, from the service-based view of value, and from symbolic interactionism. The analysis will underscore the similarities and differences between the perspectives and clarify the potential contribution the perspective of symbolic interactionism may offer for complementing and extending extant marketing knowledge on value. I conclude the chapter by offering a definition of value based on symbolic interactionist notions. The definition is used as a foundation for answering the research questions posed in this study.

Value and its emergence have been presented as a result of active and intentional production and creation activities as well as "just" emerging within everyday life with no specific intentional efforts. The traditional goods-

centered logic has regarded the producer to produce value and to embed it into goods or services as outputs of the producer's manufacturing processes (Grönroos, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The primary focus of the goods-dominant logic has centered on the exchange of an object containing embedded value. Therefore, the producer of value is the supplier who posits value into objects of exchange.

In line with the service-based view on value, the supplier's role as the creator of value is diminished and the customer's role is underscored (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). According to Grönroos and Voima (2012), customers create value in their own value-in-use processes whereas customers and suppliers co-create value when interacting together. The role of production – such as design, development, manufacturing, and delivery – is regarded as a process within which potential value is generated (Grönroos, 2011). Eventually, value is dynamically created by customers and facilitated by suppliers (Flint, 2006; Grönroos, 2011).

However, value may emerge within individuals' everyday activities without any intentional creation attempts. Therefore, at this subconscious level, value can be regarded as emerging or being formed (Grönroos, 2011; Voima et al., 2010)

Objects and meanings play a central role when the emergence of value is understood in line with symbolic interactionism. When individuals interact with themselves and with others, individuals indicate or notice 'things' and simultaneously start the subconscious process of interpretation. Through the process of interpretation, the individual makes 'things' into objects by giving meanings to the 'things' he has indicated (Blumer 1969). All meanings, including value, are interpreted within everyday processes in interaction between and within individuals. Therefore, meanings such as value cannot be encapsulated or imprisoned and given as such to other individuals – as from a marketer to a customer.

Value can be determined objectively or subjectively, and from a collective or individual perspective. According to social exchange theory, objects of exchange carry inbuilt meanings that are considered the same by every individual (Homans 1974). Based on social exchange theory, each resource is regarded as possessing some worth, being of benefit (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). These rewards are both economic and social in character (Foa and Foa 1980) and are considered unanimous for human beings. Therefore, the seller can predict the value of an object for an individual buyer. These notions resonate to the traditional goods-dominant logic according to which products are considered as carriers of static value that is consensually appreciated by everyone (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

In comparison, service-based view on value offers the following definition for value determination:

“Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary” (Vargo and Lusch, 2008, 7).

Therefore, value is determined from an individual’s subjective viewpoint (see also Ulaga and Eggert, 2005), is context-dependent (Corsaro and Snehota, 2010) and involves processes that are “dynamic, interactive, non-linear and often unconscious” (Payne et al., 2008, 86). Thus, even though the producer may try to embed value into a product, it is eventually the customer as the user of the product who decides whether the product is valuable for him or not.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the dynamic definitions individuals give to objects based on the objects’ use within social interaction (Flint, 2006). The process of interpretation in relation to objects is unending. As the individual is constantly in contact with himself and with others, the ongoing process of interpretation modifies the meanings the individual has appointed to objects. Moreover, the processes of interpretation and modification of meanings may occur within shorter or longer timeframes. Along these lines, Flint (2006) has studied value in marketing research as a valuing phenomenon that is dynamic and changes over time (see also Corsaro and Snehota, 2010; Flint et al., 2011). Value should be understood as “it emerges and is used within a complex dance of social interaction” (Flint, 2006, 360).

Value as a phenomenon can be understood as such or as perceived value. The majority of marketing researchers regard value as perceived value (e.g. Anderson and Narus, 1998; Grönroos, 2011; Lapierre, 1997; Menon et al., 2005; Slater and Narver, 2000; Ulaga and Eggert, 2005; Walter et al., 2001). The notion of perceived value is based on social exchange theory (Homans 1974). Rewards and costs sum up as value that can be calculated using the following formula: “profit equals reward – cost” (Homans 1958, 603). Perceived value is a trade-off and calculation between give and get components (Lambe et al., 2001; Zeithaml, 1988) or between benefits and sacrifices (Ulaga and Eggert, 2005). This is evident in the following definitions of customer value:

“Value in business markets is the worth in monetary terms of the technical, economic, service and social benefits a customer company receives in exchange for the price it pays for a market offering” (Anderson and Narus, 1998, 54).

“A business customer’s overall assessment of the utility of a relationship with a vendor based on perceptions of benefits received and sacrifices made” (Menon et al., 2005, 5)

"Customer value is created when the benefits to the customer associated with a product or a service exceed the offering's life-cycle costs to the customer" (Slater and Narver, 2000, 120).

"The trade-off between product, service, know-how, time-to-market and social benefits, as well as price and process costs in a supplier relationship, as perceived by key decision-makers in the customer's organization, and taking into consideration the available supplier relationships" (Uлага and Eggert, 2005, 81).

The definitions point to value as perceived value. In addition, two sources and levels of value are evident in these definitions: firstly, value as related to goods and services (focusing on the value of the object of exchange) and secondly, value as related to business relationships (focusing on the value of the process of exchange) (Lindgreen and Wynstra, 2005).

Examples of benefits include lower prices and operating costs (Uлага and Eggert, 2006), increased unit sales or increased margins (Slater and Narver, 2000), diminished relationship costs, and increased performance (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996) as well as relieving the customer from doing something or enabling the customer to do something (Wikström and Normann 1994). Overall, value may involve monetary, economic, technical, service, and social dimensions (Anderson and Narus, 1998; Corsaro and Snehota, 2010; Flint et al., 2002) and may rise "from a variety of sources and activities" (Cannon and Homburg, 2001, 34). Examples of sacrifices include purchasing price, acquisition costs, and operations costs (Menon et al., 2005) together with search and disposal costs (Slater and Narver, 2000).

In general, the high number of quantitative and cognitive aspects in relation to value perceptions seem to outrival the smaller amount of qualitative and emotional aspects (Flint et al., 2002; Möller and Törrönen, 2003). Moreover, when the individual perceives value, he is assumed to link both economic and social outcomes together and judge them against an alternate combination of outcomes (Blau 1964).

However, does the customer always want to make calculations of give and gets, and does he have enough knowledge at hand to perform the task (Payne et al., 2008)? In line with symbolic interactionist thinking, value exists as such, as an independent entity. For an individual, an object is appreciable in its own right.

The comparability of value holds a pivotal position in marketing studies. In line with social exchange theory thinking, rewards can be "judged relative to some standard" (Lambe et al., 2001, 8). Moreover, human beings are consciously aware of the possible rewards and as rational organisms, human beings intentionally strive for and compare best alternatives (Thibaut and Kelley 1959).

Homans (1974) has offered two propositions – value proposition and rationality proposition – for capturing these notions. According to the value proposition, positive outcomes are regarded as rewards, which can be compared against each other and put into ranking order. Based on the rationality proposition, the human being is aware of and calculates between the best choices. Moreover, a person may become gradually saturated with a certain reward, and additional proportions of that reward become less valuable in comparison to the earlier proportions (Homans 1974). In a parallel fashion, Holbrook (1996, 138) has defined customer value as “an interactive relativistic preference experience” within consumer research.

In line with Homans’ (1974) propositions, Thibaut and Kelley (1959) have offered the concepts of comparison level (CL) and comparison level for alternatives (CL-alt) (see also Bolton, Smith and Wagner, 2003; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). With the help of these constructs, comparisons as a basis for decision-making have been widely applied in business-to-business marketing (e.g. Anderson and Narus, 1984; 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987; Gassenheimer, Houston and Davis, 1998; Wilson, 1995).

Considered from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, interpretations and meanings of objects cannot be ranked between or within individuals (Rock 1979). Meanings – including appreciations – are autonomic in nature and exist in a person’s mind. The existence of a certain meaning is not dependent on the existence of other meanings; meanings need not to be compared in order to exist. The impossibility of ranking can also be understood from the perspective of noumenon and phenomenon (Rock 1979). A noumenon belongs to the physical objective reality and is therefore not open to be directly known by an individual. What an individual is able to know is his own unique definition of the noumenon that becomes a dynamic phenomenon within the individual’s personal and unique mind action (Charon 2010). If individuals were able to directly know a noumenon – the thing as such – then rankings would be meaningful as individuals could be certain of what they are actually ranking within themselves and between others. However, individuals know only their own dynamic and unique definition of a noumenon. Then, ranking becomes a question of comparing individually “flavored” and changing interpretations of objects, which means that no one is able to know what exactly is being compared.

Marketing studies have underscored the post-transactional phase of a selling process as *the temporal context for the use of value*. Studies building on the exchange view of marketing, highlight customer value that emerges in customer’s processes at the post-transactional phase (e.g. Anderson and Narus, 1998; Slater and Narver, 2000; Ulaga and Eggert, 2005).

The service-based view on value has underlined the notion of value-in-use (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Value ‘comes into being’ when a customer uses the product/service on the basis of which “value is perceived and determined by the customer” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 7). Therefore, real value is generated only in customer’s usage processes (Grönroos, 2008; 2011). This implies that value can be generated after the point of sale; after the product/service has been passed on to the customer’s possession.

Based on symbolic interactionism, individuals may notice objects and interpret them as valuable whenever they choose to and based on whatever grounds they like. Thus, symbolic interactionism opens up the possibility for scrutinizing new temporal contexts for appreciating value; besides the post-transactional settings.

To sum up, marketing studies have approached value as an entity predefined by the supplier and embedded in the product or being intentionally created. However, value may be regarded as emerging. Marketing studies underscore the subjective interpretation of value instead of objective value determination. However, most marketing studies follow the understanding on value as a calculated entity in terms of perceived value; the notion of which is based on social exchange theory and the calculation model offered by Homans (1974). Marketing studies have dominantly adopted the comparability between various forms of value whereas symbolic interactionism considers comparability an impossibility. Most marketing studies focus on understanding value-in-use in the post-transactional context whereas symbolic interactionism considers the emergence and use of value possible in any temporal contexts.

2.4 Defining value along symbolic interactionist notions

In the spirit of symbolic interactionism, in this study, value is defined as “a subjective, appreciative interpretation of an object” (originally defined by Jokiniemi and Halinen, 2012). This definition underscores the individual as the interpreter of value from his subjective perspective. Interpretation refers to the process of interpreting and understanding through which the individual gives meanings to objects (Blumer 1969). When the individual appreciates the object, he attaches the meaning of value to the object. These subjectively appreciated objects may be concrete or abstract in nature. In other words, anything a person notices can be of value for that person.

This study and its definition of value regard the individual in a holistic manner. When the individual is approached from an all-encompassing viewpoint, both cognitive and emotional aspects of mind-action are considered. The holistic view regards individuals as gathering and analyzing information

as well as being engaged with their feelings, interests, and attitudes (cf. Wikström and Normann 1994).

I approach value as a phenomenon in its own right (see also Jokiniemi and Halinen, 2012). Therefore, value is understood as an independent entity. In other words, I regard value as gross value instead of net value. Benefits and sacrifices do not belong in the understanding of value as an autonomous entity.

As value is a matter of subjective interpretation, it is up to the individuals to decide whether there is any value for them when an action occurs. For example, a customer representative is not at the mercy of a salesperson's value creation as the salesperson is trying to create value for the customer representative. Even though a salesperson might create value successfully up to his own standards, the created value might not be interpreted as 'valuable' by the customer representative. The created value might be valuable only from the salesperson's point of view, based on his assumptions – instead of being based on the customer representative's own subjective interpretations.

The salesperson cannot imprison value and give it to the customer representative as a foolproof source of value. Only the customer representative is in a position to consider 'something' as appreciable. The emergence of this something may be at most facilitated by the salesperson – although the salesperson may not even be aware of it. According to symbolic interactionism, a person chooses *what* he wants to indicate in a situation and *how* he wants to define it (Blumer 1969).

Symbolic interactionism views the human being from a specific perspective. The individual is considered as an active actor in each situation. The individual interacts with himself and with others and chooses independently for example what kind of objects he wants to indicate as appreciable. The individual himself is the only one who can understand his own specific world of objects. The individual does not automatically obey the rules of reciprocity nor does he compare various forms of value in a mathematical fashion or calculate between benefits and sacrifices. Based on symbolic interactionism, the individual is regarded as interacting in present situations. Also valuable objects emerge in the present situation. These "present situations" are not temporally restricted to any specific phase in relation to a selling process or even a sales meeting.

As each theoretical approach offers a certain perspective on reality, symbolic interactionism may offer new insights to complement the mainstream industrial marketing studies building on the notions of social exchange theory and the service-based view on value.

3 INTERACTION-BASED VALUE IN PERSONAL SELLING

This study focuses on understanding the interaction-based value that emerges in relation to a business-to-business sales meeting. The interaction itself occurs within and between salespersons and customer representatives during individual sales meetings in the overall context of the selling process. The purpose in this chapter is to review the sales literature and to produce an organized understanding of what is known about interaction and about value and the connections between them. I will review the extant literature to explicate what has been taken into consideration in regard to interaction-based value: its forms and application as well as its various levels and contexts.

Interpersonal interaction is the central element in selling as “personal selling is an interpersonal process” (Spiro et al., 1977, 355). Hence, research on personal selling has widely focused on understanding interpersonal interaction in sales settings (e.g. Boorum et al., 1998; Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993; Spiro et al., 1977; Williams and Spiro, 1985; Williams et al., 1990). Nowadays, research efforts are focused on understanding value creation as a form of interaction and the salesperson’s role in that creation (Barber and Tietje, 2008; Blocker et al., 2012; Dixon and Tanner, 2012; Weitz and Bradford, 1999). The research interest in salespersons as value creators resonates with the contemporary service-centered economy where knowledge and value creation have become sources for building competitive advantage (Evans and Miao 2011).

Although there is extensive research interest on the value creation process, the valuable outcomes are considered to be perceived and used in the post-transactional context. Therefore, value that may be perceived and used in the pre-transactional context has been neglected in sales research. Overall, these shortfalls point to the general tendency of sales research to focus on longitudinal selling processes and their final outcomes in dominantly quantitative forms (cf. Jackson et al., 2010).

I begin the chapter by reviewing sales interaction studies and summarizing various facets of sales interaction in line with symbolic interactionist notions. I continue by analyzing selling orientations and the input they give to understanding sales meetings as contexts for value emergence. I will also analyze studies on value drivers to construct a more coherent frame around the contemporary understanding of interaction-based value and its application, levels, and contexts. I also challenge the contemporary temporal focus on the final

outcomes of selling processes by proposing sales meetings as an additional value source.

3.1 Interaction in a sales meeting

Interpersonal interaction in a sales meeting forms the basis for understanding interaction-based value. Therefore, interaction as such needs to be analyzed in detail to understand the basis for the emergence of interaction-based value. Interaction-based value is dependent on the interaction of both the salesperson and the customer representative (Woodruff and Flint, 2006). Thus, interaction needs to also be considered from a genuinely dyadic perspective. I will next review how interpersonal interaction has been approached in personal selling studies.

3.1.1 *Interpersonal sales interaction*

Selling formulas are among the most widely known early theories explaining sales interactions and selling. Stimulus-response, selling formula (AIDA), and need-satisfaction theories as selling formulas presented sales interactions rather one-sidedly, from the salesperson's perspective (Cash and Crissy 1964). Overall, sales research did not traditionally consider sales meetings as events where both participants were seen as focal, active, or equal during the interaction (cf. Spiro et al., 1977).

The stimulus-response theory originates from psychological experiments with animals. It assumes a given stimulus causes a given response. In a selling situation, it purports that when a salesman says and does the right things (stimuli), the customer will make an order (response) (Cash and Crissy 1964). According to *the selling formula theory*, the salesperson needs to take the customer through four mental states. The journey through these states – attention, interest, desire and action (AIDA) – will lead to sales⁵. The theory is based on presenting the same standard (canned) presentation to all customers, who are treated alike. Moreover, the sequential process of giving a sales presentation is orchestrated by the salesperson who can secure a sale by following preset procedures (Cash and Crissy 1964). Thus, the stimulus-response theory and the selling formula adopted a mechanical perspective to

⁵ With regard to the AIDA model, Strong (1925, 349) states the following: "E. St. Elmo Lewis formulated the slogan, 'Attract attention, maintain interest, create desire,' in 1898. Later he added the fourth term 'get action.'"

the interaction between human beings. The mechanicality becomes evident when the theories are compared with the source-message-receiver (S-M-R) model, which is also applied in one-way mass communication (Capon, Holbrook and Hulbert, 1977). According to the S-M-R model, there is active action from the sender's side and passive reaction from the receiver's side.

The third theory – *need-satisfaction* – is a more sophisticated version of the other two theories. Based on the need-satisfaction, customers make purchases because they have needs and want to satisfy them. When a salesman wants to adopt the theory into practice, he needs to create questions in order to discover the needs of the customer and then convince the customer that the salesman's product is capable of fulfilling the customer's needs. This involves going through the stages of need development, need awareness, and need fulfillment (Cash and Crissy 1964). Although customer's needs are taken into consideration, the meeting is still dominated by the salesman. When referring to a sales meeting, Cash and Crissy (1964) use the term "sales interview" which describes the salesperson as the interviewer and the meeting as resembling separate monologues rather than a true dialogue. However, the prospect is still viewed as passive (Webster, 1968). The early theories inherently present the salesperson as the dominating party in sales meetings and consider the interaction from a one-sided perspective.

Chapple and Donald (1947) were pioneers in dyadic interaction studies. They introduced a machine called the Interaction Chronograph. The gadget measured a salesperson's activity/energy curve and initiative-dominance curve when he was interacting with a customer in a department store context. Two decades later, the researcher Evans (1963) became the originator of studying salesman-prospect interaction as a process in the wider framework of the relationship (cf. Davis and Silk, 1972; Spiro et al., 1977). His viewpoints challenged the one-shot, one-sided salesmanship perspective to selling. Evans (1963) motivated the move of the unit of analysis from individual behavior to social behavior (see also Webster, 1968). Also, Willett and Pennington (1966) regarded personal selling as a process – namely a problem-solving process – which required the participation and interaction of both the salesman and the buyer if a successful outcome was desired. This interaction approach to personal selling served also as a basis for considering the salesperson and the customer as a dyad (Willett and Pennington 1966).

The persistent image of pushy salesmen practicing stimulus-response monologues long overshadowed academic attempts to highlight the interactive nature of selling. Capon et al. (1977) encouraged researchers to study the two-way communication flow in salesman-buyer interactions, Davis and Silk (1972) considered interaction as the most fundamental aspect of selling, and Wilson (1977) argued that an exchange takes place within the wider context of

buyer–seller interaction. Evans (1963, 76) summarized the dyadic perspective as follows: “The sale is a product of the particular dyadic interaction of a given salesman and prospect rather than a result of the individual qualities of either alone” (see also Cronin, 1994).

As Spiro et al. (1977) emphasized in the late 1970s, sales research had traditionally concentrated on unilaterally analyzing the salesperson’s side of the phenomenon, despite the early dyadic views of sales as interpersonal interaction. Although selling was regarded as an interpersonal process, research had concentrated on isolated elements taken out of the processual context (Spiro et al., 1977). To this end, Spiro et al. (1977) presented the personal selling process model to consider relations among various elements within the selling process. The model regarded both the salesman and the buyer as focal persons who equally affected the advancement of the process. Together, the participants form a particular relational context that adapts to the flow of the interaction (Corsaro and Snehota, 2010).

To sum up, the research on sales interaction has traditionally emphasized a reactive chain of events mastered by the salesperson. However, sales meetings have been considered as steadily moving from seller-dominated sales monologues to genuine dialogues starting from the buyer’s viewpoint (Williams et al., 1990). Research interest on sales interaction has evolved in an opposite direction from that of early selling formulas; sales effectiveness has been proven to be affected by behavior related to the salesperson, the customer, and the dyad (Williams and Spiro, 1985) as the buyer and the seller jointly participate in the creation of value in the course of the selling process (Barber and Tietje, 2008; Blocker et al., 2012).

Despite earlier one-sided views on sales interactions, the relational context and processual view of selling has long been acknowledged. One of the founding fathers of academic research on personal selling is Edward Strong (cf. Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Wilson, 1977). Strong begins the preface of his book *The Psychology of Selling and Advertising* as follows: “The fundamental objective of selling is to make a customer. It is only recently that this truth has been appreciated. Many sellers are still striving only to make sales: some comprehend the difference between making sales and making customers, but do little else than talk about it” (Strong 1925, vii). Thus, nearly a hundred years ago, Strong (1925) argued in favor of relational exchange (cf. Dwyer et al., 1987). He challenged the salesperson to look beyond the immediate sale even though the one-time transaction had secured income for the time being.

Strong’s (1925) plea for relationship-minded salespersons is nowadays a central concern in the value-driven marketplaces (Rackham and DeVincentis 1999). The contemporary value creation setting challenges marketing to move from selling to listening, from making to customizing, and from servicing to

co-creating (Payne et al., 2008). Next I turn to analyzing how interaction is understood in contemporary sales research.

3.1.2 *Different facets of sales interaction*

During an active selling process, a salesperson and a customer representative interact through various channels on a regular basis. Face-to-face meetings, exchange of e-mails, teleconferencing, and conversations over the phone are examples of interaction channels that may be applied during the selling process. This study focuses on face-to-face sales meetings and on the ways individuals interact with each other in this particular context.

In sales studies, the verb “interacting” is typically referred to as a commonly understood word. From a temporal perspective interaction may refer to interpersonal interaction between a salesperson and a customer representative during a particular sales meeting (Wilson, 1976). However, interaction can also be viewed from a processual and longitudinal perspective. From this overarching view, interaction becomes a term that may encompass the whole selling process, which consists of several sales meetings:

“An interaction is defined as beginning when a salesperson first contacts a customer in an attempt to make a sale. The interaction concludes when the salesperson makes the sale or decides to discontinue efforts in this direction. An interaction may be concluded during one face-to-face encounter or may continue over a sequence of encounters.” (Weitz, 1981, 91)

Thus, the temporal focus and context of interaction may range from a one-shot sales meeting to a long-term selling process. In addition, interacting is also interchangeably replaced with such words as negotiating, communicating, influencing or bargaining (Williams et al., 1990). Sales interaction studies seem to dominantly follow – explicitly or implicitly – the definition of interaction as “interpersonal communication” (Webster, 1968, 10). In general, interaction is an ill-defined concept in sales research (Williams and Spiro, 1985; Williams et al., 1990).

In this study, I scrutinize interaction at the micro-level between individuals and in the context of a particular sales meeting. Moreover, I regard the verb of interacting as a concept that consists of various dimensions or facets. Thus, the richness of interacting can be constructed and understood from differing perspectives. In the spirit of symbolic interactionism, interaction during an interpersonal event can be understood by considering both overt and covert actions of the interacting individuals. I define interaction as overt and covert actions within and between salespersons and customer representatives in

relation to a sales meeting. Overt actions refer to actions or behaviors that are observable by others, whereas covert actions or cognitive and affective processes are not observable by others. Both overt and covert actions are always present whenever individuals interact. When both overt and covert actions are considered, a more comprehensive view of interaction may be constructed.

When a salesperson and a customer representative interact in a sales meeting, they both may observe and take note of each other's overt actions. For example, the salesperson may observe the customer representative's frustrated tone of voice and choice of certain strict words as overt action. At the same time, the salesperson may also process these observations in his own mind as covert action and, for example, consider how he should ask a certain question since the customer representative seems irritated. Therefore, both observable interaction elements (voice qualities) and unobservable interaction elements (considering something in one's mind) are present when individuals interact. Individuals explicitly express and share some of the interaction elements with each other – whether intentionally or unintentionally – while other interaction elements remain implicit.

In order to construct an understanding of the contemporary view of interpersonal interaction in the context of a sales meeting, I further analyzed seminal sales interaction studies in business-to-business settings (Boorum et al., 1998; Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993; Comer and Drollinger, 1999; Jacobs et al., 2001; McFarland et al., 2006; Spiro et al., 1977; Weitz, 1981; Williams and Spiro, 1985; Williams et al., 1990). In these conceptual articles the authors scrutinized interaction at the level of the dyad; the salesperson and the customer representative during a particular sales meeting.

While scrutinizing the articles I particularly looked for the various ways the authors referred to or termed “interaction” in their studies. I was pursuing to understand what the authors regarded the individuals as doing in practical terms when they were interacting with each other. The studied articles pointed at both overt and covert actions that the individuals were engaged with while interacting. The understanding based on the analyzed studies is illustrated in Figure 2.

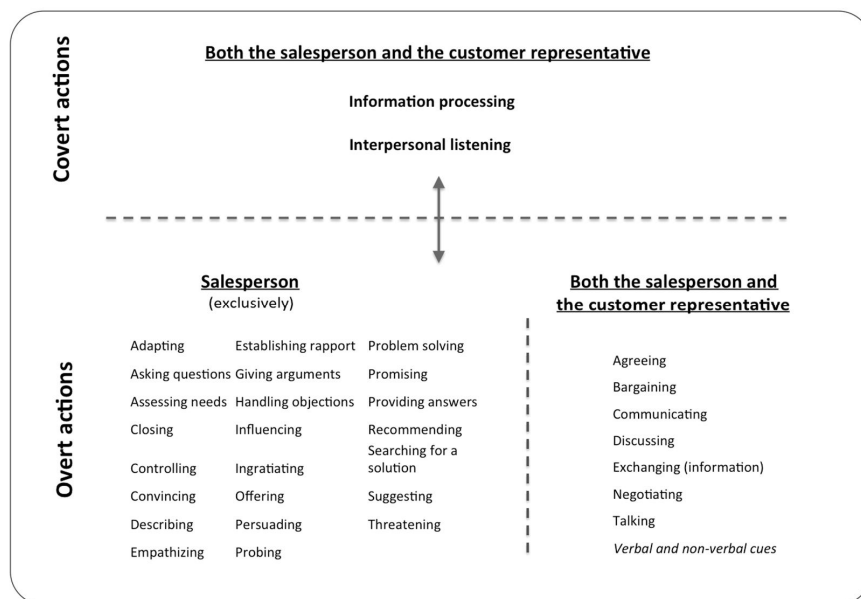


Figure 2 Interpersonal interaction in a sales meeting as a combination of overt and covert actions.

Based on the reviewed articles, overt and covert actions are performed by both the salesperson and the customer representative or solely by the salesperson during a particular sales meeting (Figure 2). Overt actions performed exclusively by the customer representative were not mentioned in the studied articles, therefore the logical third category of overt actions – customer representative (exclusively) – is not included in Figure 2.

Salespersons perform a diversity of various *overt actions* in relation to a sales meeting. Salespersons establish rapport, probe for information, convince the customer, handle objections, and aim to close a sale (Comer and Drollinger, 1999; McFarland et al., 2006). In addition, salespersons solve problems, search for solutions, assess the customer's needs, and describe and offer products (Weitz, 1981) as well as suggest various options (McFarland et al., 2006). Salespersons also empathize with the customer and ingratiate the customer (Spiro et al., 1977). Salespersons are thought of in terms of persuading the customer (Boorom et al., 1998; McFarland et al., 2006; Spiro et al., 1977,) and presenting arguments (Williams, Spiro and Fine, 1990), as well as asking questions and giving answers (McFarland et al., 2006; Spiro et al., 1977; Williams, Spiro and Fine, 1990). Finally, salespersons adapt to the customer and the situation (Boorom et al., 1998; Jacobs et al., 2001; McFarland et al., 2006; Spiro et al., 1977; Weitz, 1981), control the flow of the conversation (Spiro et al., 1977; Weitz, 1981), and influence the customer

(McFarland et al., 2006; Spiro et al., 1977; Weitz, 1981; Williams & Spiro, 1985). More specifically, “the salesperson directs influence behaviors toward customers” (Weitz, 1981, 89). In terms of influence tactics, salespersons may recommend particular options to the customer, may promise certain outcomes, or may even resort to threatening the customer (McFarland et al., 2006; see also Neu and Graham, 1994).

Overt actions that are performed by both the salesperson and the customer representative include talking (Boorum et al., 1998), agreeing, and discussing (Comer and Drollinger, 1999). Interaction as overt action is also about bargaining (Williams and Spiro, 1985; Williams et al., 1990), negotiating (Spiro et al., 1977; Williams and Spiro, 1985; Williams et al., 1990), and communicating (Boorum et al., 1998; Jacobs et al., 2001; McFarland et al., 2006; Spiro et al., 1977; Williams and Spiro, 1985; Williams et al., 1990). Interaction may also be regarded as exchange of, for example, information (McFarland et al., 2006; Williams et al., 1990). Both verbal cues (questioning, restating) and non-verbal cues (facial expressions, voice qualities, and body language) also form a part of overt actions during an interpersonal event (Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993; Williams and Spiro, 1985).

According to the reviewed articles, *covert actions* (see Figure 2) are performed by both the salesperson and the customer representative. These covert and therefore implicit actions comprise two processes: (1) information processing (Williams et al., 1990) and (2) interpersonal listening (Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993). First, as a pivotal mental process related to observing overt actions, information processing includes accepting and recording information from the environment, adding meaning to decoded signals, and forming new encodings (Williams et al., 1990). Information processing may also be approached from the viewpoint of an individual taking on a specific role during an interaction (Williams et al., 1990). The individual develops an impression of the other person, chooses a strategic goal, and adapts his messages to achieve the goal, communicating according to the strategy and evaluating the effects of implementing the strategy during the interaction (Weitz, 1978). Second, when an individual is engaged in effective interpersonal listening, he senses (shows genuine interest), interprets (learns from context), and evaluates (concentrates) the messages he hears (Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993, 37). In addition, listening may be marginal (easily disturbed), evaluative (focus on literal meanings), or active (focus and feedback on both verbal and non-verbal messages) (Comer and Drollinger, 1999). As a result of the covert action of interpersonal listening, the individual may respond – say something aloud – which is then an overt action.

In addition to overt and covert actions, the studied articles also discussed communication style and the overall sales interaction context in relation to

understanding interaction between individuals. A person's communication style adds a personal and unique dimension to interaction whereas the context of the sales meeting further influences interacting in a particular sales meeting.

Communication style of an individual constitutes observable behavior that links a particular individual and his personal way of interacting to others. Most individuals prefer a certain communication style or a combination of styles across interaction events. Sheth (1976) has presented communication style as a three-dimensional construct consisting of task-oriented, interaction-oriented, and self-oriented styles (see also Williams and Spiro, 1985). Task-oriented style is characterized by a goal-oriented approach, focusing on the task and problem at hand, facilitating the transaction together, and effectively bringing the interaction to a closure. The interaction-oriented style is characterized by socializing with others through non-transactional topics as the main driver of interaction (Jacobs et al., 2001). Finally, the self-oriented style characterizes a salesperson who concentrates on himself and his own welfare during the interaction. In addition, Boorom et al. (1998) present communication competences (communication apprehensions and interaction involvement) as accompanying elements in a salesperson's communication style (see also Pitt, Berthon and Robson, 2000). When a person does not fear communication with others (absence of communication apprehension) and is capable of choosing communicative behaviors in accordance with his own goals and the interests of others (presence of interaction involvement), better sales outcomes result (Boorom et al., 1998). Communication style can also be approached as a combination of content, code, and rules (Williams and Spiro, 1985). The content is the expressed message and the code is the verbal and non-verbal form of the message, while the rules relate to the appropriateness of expressing certain contents using a certain code in a certain situation (Williams et al., 1990).

The sales interaction context refers to properties that both the salesperson and customer representative bring with them to the interaction, either consciously or subconsciously. These properties affect the flow and outcomes of interpersonal interaction and provide an overall framework for the sales meeting. Both business representatives come from a certain organizational culture and both represent a certain nationality and character as well as an individual personality (Kale and Barnes, 1992). In addition to being unique individuals and personalities, the salesperson and the customer representative also possess certain role characteristics and requirements of the situation (Williams et al., 1990). Moreover, the product or service the salesperson is presenting affects the interaction (Sheth, 1976) together with the resources and capabilities of the salesperson (Weitz, 1981). The customer's specific buying task (Weitz, 1981) also has an effect on the interaction alongside the needs and expectations of both parties (Spiro et al., 1977). A more all-encompassing

element is the level and maturity of the relationship between the customer representative and salesperson (Weitz, 1981).

In summary, various kinds of explicit and implicit interaction-related elements are present when a salesperson and a customer representative interact during a sales meeting (see Figure 2). Both individuals bring with them different backgrounds and various expectations to the meeting as a context for the meeting, apply a certain communication style, and are engaged – consciously and subconsciously – in overt and covert actions. All the interaction-related elements form the basis for the emergence of interaction-based value. All the elements, a selected combination of them, or a single element may be appreciated by the salesperson and/or the customer representative and thus trigger the emergence of value. The interaction-related elements help to understand the nature of a sales meeting as a platform for the emergence of interaction-based value.

Overall, the understanding of and applied vocabulary in relation to personal selling in a face-to-face setting has shifted from bargaining and negotiating to helping and challenging the customer. The focus of selling has transformed from closing a deal to helping the customer to achieve business goals. More specifically, when selling is approached as a context for value creation (cf. Salomonson et al., 2012), the terminology that is used for understanding the interaction between the salesperson and the customer representative adopts new characteristics. For example, Dixon and Tanner (2012) regard selling as embedded in a customer's value creation process and call for a new vocabulary. The vocabulary – a reflection of sales behaviors in practice – portrays the salesperson as a facilitator of customer's value creation. Dixon and Tanner (2012) describe the salesperson's interaction using the following words: engaging, collaborating, challenging, providing, diagnosing, and helping the customer to understand, to see different options, and to fulfill a vision. In general, this choice of terminology echoes the transformed role of selling. Salespersons are no longer considered as merely problem solvers or value communicators; instead, they are taking the role of value facilitators and value enablers for the benefit of customers' value creation processes (Hunter and Perreault, 2007; Johnston and Peters 2011; Weitz and Bradford, 1999).

The change of perspective on interaction is also evident in regard to sales steps and techniques during a selling process. There has been a clear move from the one-shot, stepwise selling techniques (Dubinsky, 1980/1981) toward a more strategic, holistic, and relationship-oriented approach of selling (see, for example, Moncrief and Marshall, 2005; Storbacka et al., 2009; Weitz and Bradford, 1999). The seven steps of selling – locating and prospecting for customers, the preapproach, the approach, the sales presentation, handling objections/sales resistance, the close, and post-sale follow up – were also more

seller- than customer-oriented (Dubinsky, 1980/1981; Moncrief and Marshall, 2005). The focus was predominantly on the phases of probing for information, objection handling, and closing (Rackham 1988). Characteristic to the evolved selling process presented by Moncrief and Marshall (2005) is that the process occurs over time, the steps in the process need not be performed in an orderly manner, every sales call does not necessarily require the full accomplishment of every step of the process, and the overall aim is to look for long-term relationships and the accomplishment of mutual goals. All activities are centered around the customer and driven by customer needs instead of the needs and desires of the seller (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005).

To sum up, nowadays customers' goals drive sales meetings and guide interpersonal interaction in its covert and overt forms during the meetings. When the interaction enables the customer representative to get closer to his goals, the sales meeting may well stand for a platform for the emergence of value.

Next, I turn to negotiation studies, selling orientations, and the perspectives they offer for understanding preferred sales behaviors in relation to the emergence of value. I also consider sales meetings as independent value sources that yield value throughout the entire selling process in addition the final outcomes of the process.

3.2 Perspectives on value in personal selling

According to my search strategies, there are no sales studies focusing on the forms of interaction-based value, its application, or its beneficiaries in relation to an individual sales meeting in a business-to-business setting. At most, the potential connection between value and individual sales meetings is mentioned in a cursory fashion.

Negotiation studies (e.g. Huber and Neale, 1987; Roering, 1977; Schurr and Ozanne, 1985) comprise the only research stream within sales research that explicitly focuses on studying individual sales meetings. Instead of the whole selling process, negotiation studies focus on individual sales meetings that occur prior to the customer's purchase decision. Negotiation as a form of interaction occurs as "a way to resolve issues without resorting to actions that hurt or destroy relationships" (Carrell and Heavrin 2008, 3). Deal-making, decision-making, and dispute-resolution are examples of the typical negotiation types (Carrell and Heavrin 2008). Deal-making refers to negotiating over and bargaining for optimum prices and terms when entering into a contract. Decision-making is a more general type of negotiation when the parties aim to

reach a decision that is mutually beneficial. Dispute-resolution negotiations are related to unsatisfactory situations and the ways to resolve them.

Negotiation studies focus mostly on deal-making and decision-making negotiations. The studies highlight certain preferable negotiation outcomes, such as the sellers' profits in monetary terms (Huber and Neale, 1987; Roering, Slusher and Schooler, 1975) and the level of agreement and bargaining toughness (Schurr and Ozanne, 1985). Negotiation studies do not explicitly discuss the connection or interchangeability between the concepts of value and negotiation outcomes.

However, negotiations are only one of the several forms of interaction that occur in sales meetings during the selling process. In particular, deal-making negotiations occur toward the end of the selling process (Plouffe et al., 2013), and in today's long sales cycles, there are numerous other interaction forms that occur prior to the phases of negotiating and bargaining on prices and other terms.

Therefore, negotiation studies provide only a partial understanding of interaction as well as of valuable outcomes in relation to sales meetings in general. I now turn to selling orientations that posit a wider perspective on sales meetings in comparison to negotiations studies.

3.2.1 Selling orientations as settings for value emergence

Salespersons orient themselves in various ways toward sales meetings, customer representatives, selling processes, and business relationships. In sales studies, each of the selling orientations is described with key elements that result in effective sales performance and successful interaction. As the orientations emphasize certain elements as more important – or valuable – than others, each orientation actually describes the optimal context for the emergence of value in a sales setting. By analyzing selling orientation studies, I aim to build a more detailed understanding of the relation between value and interaction in a sales meeting.

I will next lay out the main selling orientations: the contingency approach (Weitz, 1981), adaptive selling (Weitz et al., 1986), customer-oriented selling (Saxe and Weitz, 1982), relationship selling (Weitz and Bradford, 1999), consultative selling (Liu and Leach, 2001), solution selling (e.g. Tuli, Kohli and Bharadwaj, 2007), and value-based selling (e.g. Terho et al., 2012). In relation to each selling orientation, I will discuss the orientation's perspective on sales meetings as contexts for value emergence. It is clear that the selling orientations (excluding value-based selling) were not originally aimed at evoking discussions on value as the research interest as the idea of value is a

rather contemporary phenomenon. However, each of the selling orientations aims at describing the most viable setting for sales interaction that may also prove to be valuable.

According to *the contingency approach*, a salesperson chooses a suitable strategy to follow during a sales meeting based on the nature of the particular sales interaction (Weitz, 1981). Weitz (1981) abandoned the idea of discovering the most suitable and stable set of behaviors that in general would fit in most sales situations. Instead, he focused the research effort into framing the main elements that affect and explain the success of an interaction in a dynamic fashion. From the perspective of value and value emergence, the contingency approach can be viewed as implying to the success of sales interaction as the goal of the orientation. Success is created by a salesperson that chooses the most appropriate strategy in each sales interaction. The context for value creation needs to be understood as a dynamic setting that intertwines the salesperson, the customer's buying task, and the interaction between the salesperson and the customer (Weitz, 1981).

The adaptive nature of selling has long been on the agenda of sales researchers. Evans (1963, 76) described the adaptive situation in a straightforward manner: "The adaptable salesman is whatever the prospect wants. The good salesman is a chameleon and likes being one". It was not until 1986 that Weitz, Suja and Suja coined the term *adaptive selling*. In their view, a salesperson has the opportunity to adapt his sales presentation and style according to each individual customer during and across sales meetings. Based on the perceived information and cues observed during a sales meeting, the salesperson can change his selling tactics, behavior, social style, and physical appearance to better match the situation and the customer (Giacobbe, Jackson, Crosby and Bridges, 2006; Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Weitz et al., 1986). From the perspective of value creation, the successful adaptation of the salesperson is central. The context for value creation calls for a match between the salesperson and the customer representative.

Customer-oriented selling posits a company's market orientation at the individual level and regards the salesperson as the implementer of the marketing concept (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Customer-oriented selling involves the salesperson aiming for long-term customer satisfaction and benefit through helping the customer to buy based on the customer's needs. From the perspective of value creation, customer-oriented selling can be understood as stressing customer need satisfaction and benefit for the selling company. Need satisfaction is facilitated by a salesperson that helps the customer to buy. Customer's needs characterize the context of value creation.

Relationship selling, or partnering, takes a long-term perspective. In the practice of relationship selling, "selling activities are directed toward building

partnerships with key business-to-business customers” (Weitz and Bradford, 1999, 241). The securing, building, and nurturing of a profitable relationship and balancing between short-term and long-term performance is characteristic of relationship selling (Ahearne, Jelinek and Jones, 2007; Beverland, 2001). In a relationship selling context, value is created by the salesperson that secures, builds, and nurtures the relationship. The context for value creation needs to be understood from a long-term relationship perspective.

Liu and Leach (2001, 147) have defined *consultative selling* as “... the process of professionally providing information for helping customers take intelligent actions to achieve their business objectives”. The consultative selling process includes the selling steps of problem identification, presentation of solution, and continued customer support (Sheth and Sharma, 2008), with a genuine interest in the customer’s business and factors that affect decision-making (Smith, 1991). The consultative selling orientation is typical in the context of selling professional, complex services. The consultative selling orientation views well-informed decisions as important for the customer. These well-informed decisions and actions are created with the help of a salesperson who truly understands the customer’s business and provides information for the customer. The context for value creation underlines customer’s business objectives and the decision-making process.

Solution selling is related to a complex selling process that includes long sales cycles and requires a sales force balancing between even conflicting interests within a customer organization (Tuli et al., 2007). Solution selling involves a change in philosophy: seeing the solution from the viewpoint of the customer as a relational process instead of regarding it from the seller’s view as a package of goods and services (Tuli et al., 2007; see also Storbacka, Polsa and Sääksjärvi, 2011). Solution selling demands an in-depth understanding of the customer’s problem and aims to achieve business goals (Sawhney, 2006). Value is created by a salesperson that provides and enables solutions for the customer and orchestrates actions between the companies. The context for value creation is characterized by seeing the solution from the customer’s view as a relational process that involves the whole selling company, not only the sales department.

Value-based selling involves a salesperson as a consultant manifesting value in quantitative terms as improvements to the buying company’s processes. According to Kaario et al. (2004), salespersons no longer sell solutions or services. Instead, salespersons sell business impacts that can be later measured in the form of increased profits for the buying company as well as for the selling company. Also, Terho et al. (2012, 178) underscore the salesperson’s ability to understand the customer’s business and processes and to craft improvements to the processes together with the customer. The salesperson

has the opportunity to become a customer's advocate by creating offerings that create new benefits for the customer or reduce the costs of the existing benefits (Rackham and DeVincentis 1999). Alongside securing improvements for the company's business processes, the salesperson adopts an analytics-driven approach and offers solid evidence to demonstrate the potential value of the offering for the company's business performance (Anderson et al. 2007). Töytäri, Brashear, Parvinen, Ollila and Rosendahl (2011) emphasize engaging the customer in the value assessment process. Not only do these value calculations show the value for the customer in monetary terms, but the calculations also assess the return for the selling company in return of delivering value to the customer (Anderson et al. 2007).

In line with value-based selling, value is considered as a quantifiable element that is related to the offering sold for the customer. The crafting of the offering requires input from both the salesperson and the customer as the offering is related to the customer's specific processes. The impact of the offering for the customer's business can be estimated prior to the point of sale. Therefore, the value in relation to the offering does not begin to actualize if the customer does not buy the offering.

Overall, selling orientations are overlapping, and clear boundaries between one orientation and another cannot be drawn. This is due to the fact that all the orientations are based on similar logic and build on earlier orientations in a cumulative fashion. However, when selling orientations are analyzed as settings for value emergence, differing nuances and perspectives come into view. The selling orientations differ in their temporal orientations (whether they focus on sales meetings or the selling process), the activities involved in the creation of value, and the optimal context for a successful interaction. These elements are described in Table 1 in detail.

Table 1 Selling orientations and their perspectives on value emergence in sales settings.

Selling orientation	Author(s)	Temporal focus (the sales meeting/the selling process)	Value creation	Context for value creation
The contingency approach	Weitz (1981)	The sales meeting	The salesperson chooses the most appropriate strategy in each sales interaction.	A dynamic setting that intertwines the salesperson, the customer's buying task, and the interaction between the salesperson and the customer.
Adaptive selling	Evans (1963); Sheth (1976); Tosi (1966); Spiro and Weitz (1990); Weitz et al., (1986)	The sales meeting	The salesperson adapts his sales presentation and style within and across sales meetings.	Situation-specific interactional match.
Customer-oriented selling	Saxe and Weitz (1982)	The sales meeting	The salesperson helps the customer to make successful purchase decisions.	Customer needs as well as a long-term focus characterize the context.
Relationship selling	Weitz and Bradford (1999)	The selling process	The salesperson secures, builds, and nurtures the relationship.	A long-term relationship perspective enabling the creation of value.
Consultative selling	Liu and Leach (2001)	The selling process	The salesperson understands the customer's business and provides information for the customer.	Customer's business objectives and decision-making process provide the framework for the whole selling process.
Solution selling	Storbacka et al. (2011); Tuli et al. (2007)	The selling process	The salesperson provides and enables solutions for the customer and orchestrates actions between the companies.	Seeing the solution from the customer's view as a relational process that involves the whole selling company, not only the sales department.
Value-based selling	Anderson et al. 2007; Kaario et al. 2004; Rackham and DeVincentis (1999); Terho et al. (2012); Töytäri et al. (2011)	The selling process	The salesperson works with the customer to craft improvements to the buying company's processes and shows their value in quantitative terms.	Trusted partners, reciprocal value, and understanding of business models, processes, and the improvement of business profits.

As a general notion, over time the focus of selling orientations has moved from single sales meetings to selling processes and long-term relationships (Table 1). In relation to individual sales meetings, the context for value creation is presented as a dynamic platform that requires an adaptive salesperson as every sales meeting represents a unique interactional situation. When selling processes are considered, the context for value creation is a long-term relationship that integrates the customer's business objectives, decision-making processes, and the solution as a relational process.

The earlier selling orientation studies present a somewhat narrow and transactional view of sales: the interest is centered on selling and buying activities in regard to a rather predefined product or service. As the salesperson is considered to be a problem solver who helps the customer to solve a problem with a product or service, the focus is on value-in-exchange. In comparison, contemporary research stresses the salesperson as a skillful consultant who comprehensively understands the buying company's business processes and plans improvements to these processes together with the customer. Especially in professional services, the predefined product has been replaced with an offering that is in many cases unique and tailored to specific business processes. The construction of an offering of this scope requires contribution from both the salesperson and the customer representative (Storbacka et al., 2009).

Moreover, the offering may affect business processes and networks with novel innovations and changes in perspectives instead of fixing a limited problem with an existing product (Rackham and DeVincents 1999). The focus is on the customer's value-in-use. Therefore, according to the contemporary view of sales, the focus of selling has extended to cover, for example, the buying company's business models, processes, and end-customers. At the same time, the traditional selling and buying activities have been moved to the background as mere hygiene factors.

The selling orientation of value-based selling stresses the objective and predefined determination of value in quantitative terms. The quantification of value is manifested in the salesperson's ability to demonstrate and document value for the customer (Anderson et al. 2007). Moreover, the creation and delivery of value to customers is considered to be one of the key determinants of a salesperson's level of performance and effectiveness (Singh and Koshy, 2010). When the salesperson adopts the role of a value merchant, he delivers superior product/service/offering-related value to the customer and ensures equal profits for the selling company as well (Anderson et al. 2007). This is in contrast to the salesperson as a value spendthrift who does not strongly argue for the value of the offering but rather easily resorts to price concessions (Anderson et al. 2007). Salespersons may utilize, for example, software-based value calculators to offer proof of both direct cost savings (green money) and

of the more complicated reductions and improvements (gray money) that customers may receive from the offerings (Anderson et al. 2007; see also Anderson and Narus, 1998).

The objectively predefined and quantitative approach to value neglects the subjective and qualitative perspectives on value. Based on the service-based view of value, value is created and subjectively determined by an individual in his value-creating processes based on the services acquired from the selling company (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Grönroos, 2008). Value cannot be predefined; instead, value is always defined by an individual. Therefore, there may eventually emerge “more value” or “less value” or a “different kind of value” for the customer representative than ever gets calculated and estimated by the salesperson prior to a sale. And the same applies on the salesperson’s side.

The overall research focus in industrial marketing is steadily moving from the object of exchange to the subject of value (Corsaro and Snehota, 2010). In other words, the notion of value-in-exchange and the supremacy of the product as the object of exchange is being replaced with an understanding of the customer’s processes and how the customer as an individual determines value on the basis of the offering’s value-in-use. In a parallel fashion, this study challenges contemporary sales research to consider the subjects of value in sales settings: the salesperson and the customer representative. The time is ripe to look closely at value that is appreciated by the salesperson and the customer representative based on their interaction in a sales meeting. I now turn to an analysis of value that may be appreciated by the subjects of value – the salesperson and the customer representative – prior to the point of making a sale or a purchase decision. I will look at the value drivers and the type of value they indicate will emerge in the pre-transactional context of the selling process.

3.2.2 Value as emerging throughout the entire selling process

Sales research has traditionally regarded a successful sale as the desirable outcome of the selling process. “The sale” has accounted for the “value” in selling. In sales force performance studies, sales outcomes have been scrutinized with quantitative precision in terms of, for example, sales volume, cost/sales ratio, sales per account category, and customer satisfaction scores (Anderson and Oliver, 1987; Jackson et al., 2010; Onyemah and Anderson, 2009; Stathakopoulos, 1996). The quantitative approach and focus on the end results of the selling process presents a qualitatively cursory and temporarily narrow understanding of value in relation to selling processes. The temporal perspective on valuable outcomes begins to broaden when the focus is shifted

from the end of the selling process to earlier phases of the selling process as well.

The selling process can be divided into two phases: the phase prior to the point of sale and the phase after the point of sale. The former phase can also be referred to as the pre-transactional context and the latter as the post-transactional context. Extant sales research has predominantly focused on understanding value in the post-transactional context of the selling process.

Sales literature and industrial marketing literature present value drivers as concepts for understanding the emergence of value in the post-transactional context of the selling process. The presence of these value-creating levers (Rackham and DeVincentis 1999) facilitates the emergence of value; the value drivers may be considered as inputs to a process that generates outputs in the form of value (cf. Celuch et al., 2006; Humphreys and Williams, 1996). The literature presents five value drivers that facilitate the emergence of value predominantly in the post-transactional context: time-to-market and know-how of the selling company (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006), delivery performance, product quality, and service support (Lapierre, 2000; Menon et al., 2005; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). These value drivers are related to the purchased product or service. Therefore, the value drivers occur after the point of sale when the selling process is at its final phase and is concerned with delivery and implementation issues.

This study focuses on understanding interaction-based value in the pre-transactional context. Sales meetings occur prior to the point of sale, before the customer decides to buy from the seller and a contract is signed between the parties. Therefore, the value drivers that occur predominantly in the post-transactional context do not serve as a guide in framing value in relation to the pre-transactional context and in relation to individual sales meetings. In addition to the five value drivers that occur in the post-transactional context, there are three more value drivers that may be considered to occur in the pre-transactional context of the selling process: interpersonal interaction (Lapierre, 2000; Menon et al., 2005; see also Celuch et al., 2006; Humphreys and Williams, 1996), the selling company's characteristics (Lapierre, 2000; Menon et al., 2005; see also Wilson, 1976), and relationship (Lapierre 2000; Menon et al., 2005; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). Furthermore, the sales meeting comprises interpersonal interaction, the selling company's characteristics as communicated by the salesperson to the customer representative, and the sales meeting as occurring within the wider context of an ongoing relationship. Although these value drivers may be present in sales meetings, the pre-transactional context for the emergence of value is not explicitly expressed in the studies referred to above.

As the name suggests, value drivers drive and facilitate the emergence of value. Overall, value may involve monetary, economic, technical, service, and social attributions (Anderson and Narus, 1998; Corsaro and Snehota, 2010; Flint et al., 2002). Therefore, various types of value may emerge based on value drivers. I now turn to an examination of what kind of value may emerge in the pre-transactional context and who the value potentially benefits.

The literature suggests that based on interpersonal interaction as a value driver, customer representatives can make better and well-informed decisions (Lapierre, 2000; Liu and Leach, 2001) as well as gain useful advice (Wilson, 1976). In addition, salespersons' self-esteem may strengthen (Wilson, 1976), and both customer representatives and salespersons may gain a feeling of satisfaction (Kale and Barnes, 1992; Menon et al., 2005). Based on the selling company's characteristics as a value driver, the buying company may appreciate the credibility, benevolence, and image related to the selling company (Lapierre, 2000; Menon et al., 2005). The relationship may also be present as a value driver in the pre-transactional context. Based on the relationship as a value driver, both parties may appreciate value in the form of commitment and long-term focus (Menon et al., 2005), trust (Weitz and Bradford, 1999), and solidarity (Lapierre, 2000; Menon et al., 2005). In addition, relationship-related value results in fewer conflicts and in a better understanding of each other's goals, needs, requirements, and expectations (Lapierre, 2000; Menon et al., 2005).

Overall, the studied literature actually reveals that value may emerge and be acted upon in the pre-transactional context, although this point has not been previously emphasized. Interpersonal interaction, the selling company's characteristics, and the relationship between seller and buyer are value drivers that may be present already in sales meetings together with the value they drive. This notion opens up the possibility to elaborate upon and broaden the understanding of sales meetings as contexts for the emergence of value in the pre-transactional context of the selling process. This notion also furthers the traditional temporal perspective that focuses on the valuable outcomes of selling processes in the post-transactional context. Selling processes do not solely yield value at the end of the process; through sales meetings, the selling process yields value even from the beginning of the process as illustrated in Figure 3.

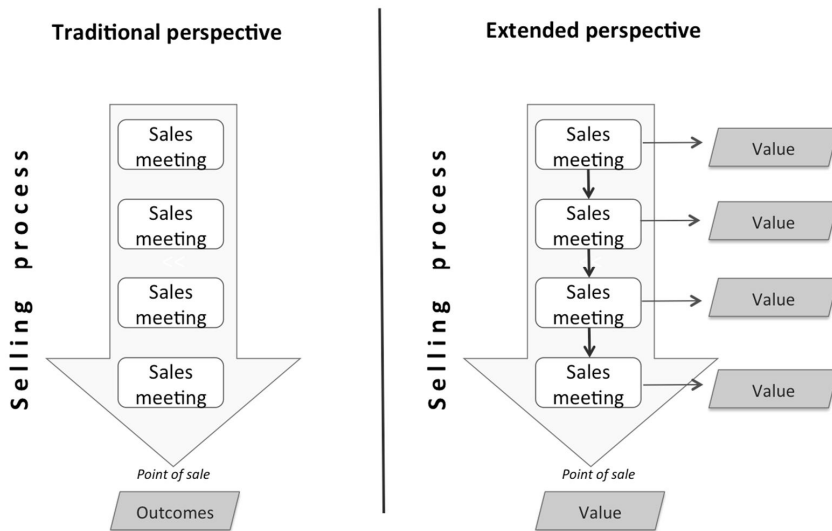


Figure 3 Traditional and extended perspectives on outcomes and value in relation to the selling process.

The traditional perspective focuses on the final outcomes of the selling process (Figure 3). These outcomes become evident only after a successful selling process. Considered from the traditional perspective, sales meetings are regarded as an important means for ensuring the final outcomes. However, when the selling process is approached from an extended perspective and sales meetings are viewed as independent platforms for the emergence of value, salespersons and customer representatives may appreciate various value forms in relation to each sales meeting. Whenever the value forms are appreciated, they can be acted upon. The value forms that have emerged based on an individual meeting may also have an effect on the forthcoming sales meetings within the same selling process.

The extended perspective also suggests that in the case that a selling process does not continue to a successful closure – does not reach the point of sale – value may nevertheless emerge and be acted upon during the earlier phases of the selling process. The valuable outcomes are no longer dependent on the successful completion of the entire selling process.

Although the value drivers as such have been studied in depth, the actual value that the value drivers drive has been overlooked as the resulting forms of value are not easily found in related studies. Therefore, value in relation to independent sales meetings stands out as a previously neglected asset that may nevertheless benefit the participants of the sales meeting and their respective companies even at earlier points in the selling process. Especially when

considering today's long sales cycles (Plouffe et al., 2013), it is important to recognize that a company and its representatives may not have to wait until the end of the long sales cycle for value to emerge and to be acted upon. Value may emerge all along the long process and be readily applicable after a single meeting.

In a similar vein, Chonko and Jones (2011) suggest that salespersons need to lessen their focus on the obvious product-related value for customers (see also Rackham and DeVincents 1999). In reality, value may actualize "outside the bounds" (Chonko and Jones 2011, 523) of the offering and take a number of forms and occupy various attributions. Therefore, value may emerge as something other than the traditional output of the selling process. In a similar fashion, Corsaro and Snehota (2010) encourage researchers to look beyond the obvious and reveal the "more real" value that is often implicit or tacit in nature. The versatility of value is contemporarily underscored as value may arise "from a variety of sources and activities" (Cannon and Homburg, 2001, 34); both in pre-transactional and post-transactional contexts.

There remains a gap to be filled if we wish to understand more fully the nature of the subjectively determined value that emerges based on sales interaction and is applied in different levels and contexts. Based on grounded theory guidelines, I now turn to the empirical domain to fill in the research gap.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section, I will describe the methodology of constructivist grounded theory and in detail describe the process of data collection and of data analysis in this study. The separated and stepwise description of the process of data collection and data analysis does not fully capture the organic and intertwined nature of producing grounded theory (Suddaby, 2006). However, for the sake of clarity, the processes of data collection and data analysis are dealt with individually.

4.1 Constructivist grounded theory

I have chosen grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) as the approach for studying how individuals appreciate sales meetings in a business-to-business setting. Grounded theory is an inductive method of gathering and analyzing data in a systematic way and it results in a theory that is grounded in data (Glaser 1978; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Goulding 2009). In other words, the resulting grounded theory “theorizes the realm of studied action” (Charmaz 2006, 151). Thus, grounded theory refers both to a method and a theory that is constructed based on applying the methods (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). The reason for adopting a grounded theory approach follows, for example, Suddaby’s (2006) view, according to which grounded theory is most suited to studies aiming at understanding how individuals interpret reality, especially in previously unresearched areas (see also Goulding, 2005). Based on its pragmatic core, grounded theory offers a practical perspective “to help researchers understand complex social processes” (Suddaby, 2006, 638).

Grounded theory methods have been widely applied in nursing and health, sociology, and organizational studies (Goulding, 2005; Rock 1979). Grounded theory was originally developed by two American sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) in the 1950s and 1960s. These forefathers were motivated by the need to provide a systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data (Goulding 2009; Rock 1979). At the time, quantitative research and the positivist approach dominated in social sciences, together with logico-deductive theory generation (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). In order to demonstrate a rigorous method for theory building based on qualitative data through inductive reasoning, grounded theory was formed (Goulding, 2005).

The forefathers of grounded theory have followed divergent routes after publishing their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Thus, two versions of grounded theory emerged: the *Glaserian* theory as related to Barney Glaser and the *Straussian* related to Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (Goulding, 2009; Morse 2009). The work of Glaser has emphasized theoretical sensitivity, the emergence of a theory, and the objective role of the researcher, whereas Strauss and Corbin have presented a subjective role for the researcher with a formulistic and systematic coding process and verification tools (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008; Goulding, 2009; Langley, 1999; Wilson and Hutchinson, 1996). As a result, Glaser (1992) has underscored *emerging* in contrast to mechanical, *forced discovery* when comparing his perspective to that of Strauss and Corbin (cf. Goulding, 2009).

Within the social sciences, grounded theory has been applied under positivist and interpretive notions and a combination of both (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008; Morse 2009). Grounded theory informed by positivism has been termed objectivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). Objectivist grounded theorists emphasize causes and explanations together with specified conditions and attempts to generalize and are driven by if–then propositions (Charmaz 2006; Goulding 2009).

I have chosen to follow the guidelines of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 1990; Charmaz 2006), which belongs to the second generation of grounded theories. The key methodologists of the second generation – including Kathy Charmaz – have studied and worked with Glaser and Strauss (Morse 2009). Constructionist grounded theory adopts the standpoint of interpretativism (Charmaz 2006; Goulding 2009). Interpretativism assumes a relativist epistemology, regards social life as a process, allows for multiple realities, accepts indeterminacy, and seeks for patterns and connections instead of linear causality chains (Charmaz 2006; Charmaz, 2009). Constructivist grounded theory is also firmly based on symbolic interactionism (Mead 1932), which belongs to the interpretive tradition (Blumer 1969; Charmaz 2006; Charon 2010; Cutcliffe, 2000). In line with interpretativism, “individuals actively create their realities” (Suddaby, 2006, 636), and it is the goal of grounded theory to understand how individuals actually interpret the reality they have created. A study based on symbolic interactionism “respects and stays close to the empirical domain” (Blumer 1969, 46).

In constructive grounded theory, the researcher is not seen as separate from the data as it is the researcher who constructs a theory through interpretations of the research participants’ interpretations of the world (Charmaz 2006). Thus, the researcher’s analysis is contextual and unique, “both data and analyses are social constructions that reflect what their production entailed” (Charmaz 2006, 131; see also Morse 2009). In line with constructivist

grounded theory, the researcher's focus is on the research participants' ways of making sense of their statements and asking what analytic sense can be made of them (Charmaz 2006). Grounded theorists theorize about data (Silverman 2010a), and constructivist grounded theorists particularly further stress the complexities of studied actions while theorizing (Charmaz 2006). In line with grounded theory methods, a theory is built by systematically linking emerging categories to each other. Thus, grounded theory does not halt at the level of a thick description or narrative interpretations (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). Grounded theory moves forward to the more abstract level to offer a framework – a theoretical understanding – of the studied action.

As a representative of the second generation of grounded theory, the constructivist grounded theory differs from the Glaserian approach by considering the subjective researcher as part of the emerging understanding. In relation to the Straussian approach, constructivist grounded theory does not follow the strict formulaic rules and sequences when analyzing data as is presented by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

The process of collecting and analyzing data is a circular one according to grounded theory, which makes it an iterative, abductive process (Charmaz, 2009). The process moves back and forth between the phases of, for example, conducting interviews, constructing and comparing conceptual and theoretical categories and their properties, letting the process guide the collection of new data, and being considerate to theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This analytical loop is reflected in two key elements – constant comparison and theoretical sampling – which are simultaneously used in “the organic process of theory emergence” (Suddaby, 2006, 634).

Furthermore, when analyzing data, grounded theorists look for meanings, processes, and patterns that are present in human interaction. The researchers are interested in how people define their reality within these processes (Cutcliffe, 2000; Langley, 1999). The interpretative analyzing process requires a creative mind-set and imagination to see the data in fresh ways, and especially from the interviewees' viewpoints (Charmaz 2006). The concept of *theoretical sensitivity* captures well the idea of following a technique yet applying creative insights (Suddaby, 2006). The above discussion summarizes the makings of a grounded theory as “a total methodological package” (Glaser, 1999, 836). However, most of all, grounded theory is a way of thinking about and approaching data (Morse 2009).

A finalized grounded theory may take the form of a substantive theory or a formal theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Typically, grounded theories are context specific and can be classified as substantive theories (Goulding, 2005). When a grounded theory is based on a study covering several contexts or multiple substantive areas and can be applied to various settings, it meets the

requirements of a formal theory (Goulding, 2005; Wilson and Hutchinson, 1996).

The grounded theory presented in this study is a substantive grounded theory. The theory is based on a particular subject area (Suddaby, 2006) and represents “a theoretical interpretation or explanation of a delimited problem in a particular area” (Charmaz 2006, 189). A substantive grounded theory is strongly situated in a certain social and interactional context.

There are four recent and interesting studies (Eriksson and Söderberg, 2010; Flint et al., 2002; Turley and Geiger, 2006; Ulaga, 2003) that have applied grounded theory methods within the discipline of marketing. The studies focus on buyer–seller interaction and are therefore topic-wise close to this research. Firstly, Flint et al. (2002) have argued for the need to develop “a customer value change theory”. The authors based their arguments on an empirical study within the context of business-to-business relationships in automobile manufacturing chains. The guiding research question was formulated as “how customers perceive value from suppliers” (Flint et al., 2002, 102). Secondly, Ulaga (2003, 677) closes the research gap of “how firms create and deliver value in business relationships”. The research presents eight relationship value drivers as a result of the grounded theory study. Thirdly, Turley and Geiger (2006, 663) studied how salespersons learn in a relational sales setting by asking “how knowledge emerges and develops in and through the sales interaction”. The authors propose a framework of a salesperson’s relational learning as a result of their grounded theory study. Fourthly, Eriksson and Söderberg (2010, 99) conducted a grounded theory study to understand “what is experienced in the interaction between the customer and the provider” in a retail bank setting. Their study challenges the concept of a relationship and advises managers to carefully assess when the consumer wants to build a relationship and when a transactional style is more appreciated.

The aforementioned four studies present various perspectives and arguments for choosing the grounded theory approach. Flint et al. (2002) illustrate grounded theory as an approach that is well-suited to study phenomena that are not well-known as the process of building a grounded theory offers depth in understanding the phenomena. Ulaga (2003) presents the approach as an opportunity to gain novel insights and as a solid base for further theoretical development. Turley and Geiger (2006) view grounded theory as well-suited to the study of social interactions and processes. The authors are also interested in the practical impact of their studies “on the life worlds of participants” (Turley and Geiger, 2006, 665). Eriksson and Söderberg (2010) underscore the opportunity to move from empirical material to a theoretical level using the grounded theory approach. The argument for choosing the grounded theory approach for this study is in line with these four studies: I strive to gain more

knowledge of a previously neglected phenomenon related to interpersonal interaction, to adopt the perspective of an individual, and to raise the study from the empirical level to theoretical categories.

I adopted a dyadic approach since it allowed for the construction of a more holistic view of the phenomenon (Barnes et al., 2007). As a sales meeting always involves at least two persons and their mutual interaction, the meeting can only be understood to its fullest by considering the combined interaction of the two individuals (Cronin, 1994).

In the knowledge-intensive context of professional business-to-business services, salespersons are equipped with solid education and experience that they apply for the benefit of the customer. A professional service may take the form of, for example, advice and opinions, analyses, or research reports (Gummesson, 1978). Moreover, salespersons use their professional knowledge and skills to diagnose and solve customers' problems in a creative and intellectual manner (Gummesson, 1978; Jaakkola and Halinen, 2006; Vafeas, 2010). In these settings, the final offering is co-created with the customer instead of being predefined (Storbacka et al., 2009). In general, professional services challenge the buyer as the salesperson usually has more expertise than the customer: the suitability of an acquired service may be difficult to assess even after usage (Sharma, 1997). Thus, the salesperson may reduce the customer's uncertainty in the purchasing situation by providing support (e.g. referrals) for decision making and engaging in reassuring interaction (Jacobs et al., 2001).

The context of business-to-business, professional services offers a fruitful environment for the exploration of interpersonal interaction of the salesperson and the customer representative. In the context of selling and buying of professional services, the service itself is abstract and multifaceted in nature. Usually there is no clear offering or tangible proof of a solution available, particularly during the initial stages of the process (Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 1990). As a result, the importance of the interpersonal interaction in the situation is emphasized.

4.2 The research process

My fieldwork began in the spring of 2010 when I conducted a pilot study. Thereafter, I negotiated successfully with a company in the fall of 2010, and together we planned to start collecting data in January 2011. However, the company cancelled their participation in December 2010. I chose another way to engage companies in my research and started contacting companies in February 2011. I began the process of collecting data in the beginning of April

2011. The collection of data and data analysis occurred virtually simultaneously and the process of data analysis did not end until I finalized this manuscript (Figure 4).

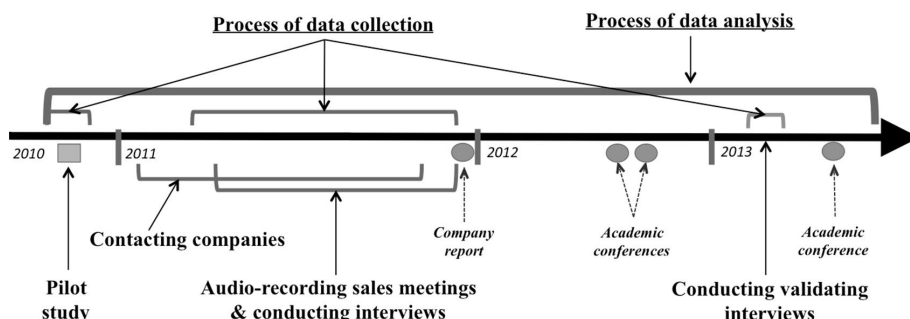


Figure 4 The process of data collection and analysis.

I collected data by audio-recording sales meetings and conducting research interviews (April–October 2010) and by collecting additional validating interviews (March–April 2013) (Figure 4). I offered a company report for the participating companies at the end of 2011 as a first round of analysis and structuring of the results. The preliminary findings and emerging understanding of my data analysis have been challenged – and further developed – by scholarly audiences in three international academic conferences (Jokiniemi 2013; Jokiniemi and Halinen 2013; Jokiniemi and Halinen, 2012). Although the active process of data collection had ended by the time of writing this section, the process of data analysis continued with related academic literature (cf. Charmaz 2006).

Throughout the rest of the thesis, I have chosen to use the term “gain” for two purposes. Firstly, “a gain” serves as a *noun* representing any appreciated element or anything interpreted as valuable by the interviewees. Secondly, “to gain” serves as a *verb* representing the interviewee receiving something the interviewee appreciates.

4.3 Process of data collection

It is characteristic of grounded theory studies to use rich and versatile empirical material (Suddaby, 2006). Multiple types of data assist in constructing representative categories and ensure the emergence of a theory that has been

viewed by the researcher from various perspectives. The forms of collected “raw” data as provided by the interviewees and material generated and interpreted by the researcher used in this study are depicted in detail in Table 2.

Table 2 The forms of collected and generated material and their usage in the analysis.

Source of data	Form of data	Amount	Raw data/ Generated material	Main usage
Sales meetings	Audio recordings	8 sales meetings; 8 hours and 42 minutes of audio-recorded material	Raw data	Understanding the context
Sales meetings	Summaries of audio recordings	8 one-page summaries	Generated material	As a checklist for the interviewees
Salesperson interviews	Audio recordings and verbatim transcripts	11 interviews; 10 hours and 17 minutes of audio-recorded material; 174 transcribed pages	Raw data	Basis for constructing a grounded theory
Customer representative interviews	Audio recordings and verbatim transcripts	9 interviews, 7 hours and 48 minutes of audio-recorded material; 130 transcribed pages	Raw data	Basis for constructing a grounded theory
Interviews and sales meetings	Field notes	20 notes/pages combining my thoughts related to interviews and to listening to audio recordings of the interviews and sales meetings	Generated material	Understanding the context
Validating interviews	Written interview notes	5 pages/ 5 interviews	Generated material	Challenging the emerging conceptual categories
Process of analyzing	Analytical memos	Approximately 60 memos, both short and long	Generated material	Constructing and challenging categories

All the empirical material – audio recordings of sales meetings and research interviews, summaries of sales meetings, interview transcripts, interview notes, field notes, and analytical memos – were used in specific ways in analyzing and in constructing the grounded theory (Table 2). Data that were collected in diverse ways ultimately consist of *slices of data* (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The data can then be combined and used for the construction of more holistic categories that have been approached from various perspectives. I now turn to describing in detail how and why the empirical material was collected and generated.

4.3.1 *Accessing sales meetings*

I was working as a Human Resource (HR) Development Manager in 2009 and felt the context of HR services would serve as familiar ground for my research. My occupation as an HR Development Manager provided an insider-view of the context of the study. It enabled me to understand the context of the sales meetings and the terminology related to HR topics. I could easily relate to customer representatives as I was myself also regularly meeting with salespersons as a customer representative. My earlier experiences as a consultant had also given me opportunities to participate in sales meetings as representing a selling company. Being an active member of various HR-related networks and associations, I decided to choose the selling and buying of business-to-business Human Resource Development services as the empirical context. As I was focusing on understanding sales meetings better, it was a natural choice to consider salespersons and customer representatives as the expert informants for the selected research context (Silverman 2010a). They could also provide a sample “rich in relevant information”, which would allow in-depth analyses of the data (Flick 1998, 71). Thus, I needed to collect face-to-face sales meetings for my research purposes.

I conducted a pilot study in the spring of 2010. The participants included three of my colleagues from Pohjola Bank’s HR department and a salesperson from a company selling HR services. The context was a sales meeting within the framework of an ongoing relationship. The sales meeting was audio recorded by my colleagues. After the sales meeting, I interviewed the three colleagues as a group and the salesperson individually. I noticed that in the group interview, the participants were quite hesitant to spontaneously describe their inner thoughts and still-developing ideas. They also let the supervisor somewhat guide the interview and gave her the first turn in answering. The supervisor’s answers also tended to guide the other participants’ answers. The individual interview with the salesperson went smoothly. He did not hesitate

in sharing his views and opinions with me. I experimented with all kinds of conceptual and empirical preliminary questions with him and found out that I received the richest answers from short and simple questions. Those kinds of questions seemed to work as good prompts for the interviewee's longer answers. The pilot study gave me confidence that the people who participated in the sales meetings did gain something from the meetings. I also understood that the interview questions would presumably be novel and surprising for the interviewees. The somewhat untraditional questions would probably cause some confusion for the interviewees and it would take some time to really think them over. This is the case with intensive interviews where interviewees are asked to answer questions they do not normally consider (Charmaz 2006). I decided to from that point conduct only individual interviews, which offered a relaxing setting and privacy for the interviewees as they did not have to worry what other people thought of their answers.

I decided to attempt to gain access to sales meetings through selling companies and started cold-calling Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and Senior Consultants of various HR companies at the beginning of February 2011. In other words, I began selling my sales research. My sales pitch went like this: "Would you like to participate in an academic research study and learn what your customers think about meeting with your salespersons?" I contacted seven CEOs and four Senior Consultants. I knew two of the people I contacted somewhat, and the rest were unfamiliar to me. I managed to organize a meeting with four of the contacts. In the meetings, I explained that I needed them to appoint a couple of their salespersons to me, and then the salespersons would select a naturally occurring sales meeting from their calendars. One company that participated in the research was recruited more spontaneously: I started talking about my need to find sales meetings for my research at a seminar and the unfamiliar person I was talking to became interested. She arranged one of the sales meetings for the study.

After several reminders, five selling companies agreed to participate in the study. This phase in the process of collecting data demanded a lot of effort; for example, after having called one CEO five times and having sent him four emails, he finally said the company would participate in the study. I worked following my husband's (a sales professional) guideline: "Do not quit until they say no". Two of the CEOs wanted me to arrange a one-hour kick-off meeting for all the potential salespersons in order for them to be introduced to the topic and to be prepared to make the required arrangements. Three of the companies did not consider it necessary to have a kick-off meeting. In these cases, I contacted each salesperson individually and explained the purpose of the research.

The recruiting work did not end with the decision-maker's approval, giving a kick-off presentation, and sending additional material. In order to succeed in data collection, I needed to involve the salespersons and get them excited about the issue (cf. Carter, Dixon and Moncrief, 2008). This meant being active, not losing momentum, and sending even more emails.

The kick-off presentation and accompanying material included a description of the detailed process of data collection in the form of an information letter (see Appendix 1). The salespersons' task was to select any upcoming sales meeting from their calendars to be included in the study. The only restrictions were that the meeting needed to take place prior to the customer's decision-making in relation to a particular offer if an offer had been proposed and that the customer needed to be a business customer. The sales meetings were allowed to take place within an active business relationship or as part of contacting completely new customers. Thus, when the salesperson had selected an upcoming sales meeting, the salesperson needed to recruit the customer representative to take part in the research.

This phase of the data collection process included three elements. Firstly, the sales meetings were audio recorded by the salesperson. Secondly, I listened to the audio recordings and summarized the main points of the sales meetings as the summary was to be used later in the individual interviews. Thirdly, salespersons and customer representatives were individually interviewed. This part of the research design is illustrated in Figure 5.

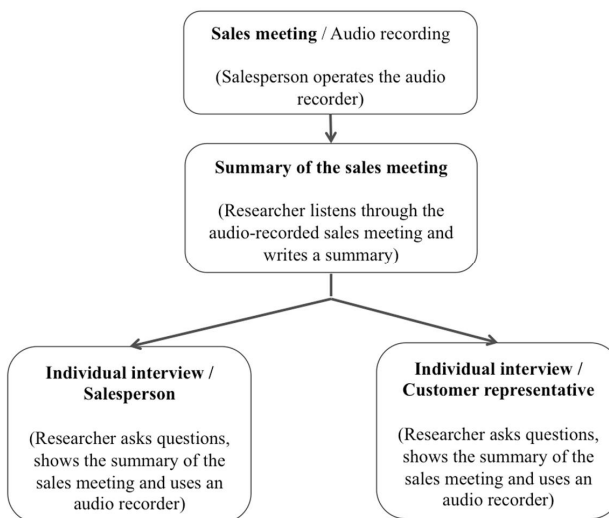


Figure 5 Research design: audio recordings and interviews.

The salespersons asked the customer representatives permission regarding two main activities: would the customer representative agree to a situation in which, firstly, the salesperson would use an audio recorder and record the meeting and, secondly, the researcher would contact the customer representative and interview him/her for an hour within a week's time of the sales meeting (Figure 5). As a token of gratitude, all the participating companies – both selling and buying companies – were promised a confidential business report of the preliminary results.

I prepared the necessary wording to help the salespersons explain the situation to the customer representatives. Most important to the salespersons were anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of information provided during the research (Silverman 2010a). In the beginning of each research interview, I again ensured that the interviewee had understood the nature of the research and was able to give informed consent. I clarified that all the collected material would remain in the possession of the researcher, nobody other than the researcher would have access to any collected material, anonymity was guaranteed by using codes and pseudonyms in place of company and individual names, and the researcher would not reveal any citations with a name to any participant (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). I was allowed to use citations from the interviews to illustrate a common view or perspective in the dissertation without referring to any recognizable names or items that would reveal the person in question. Furthermore, at the time of the interviews, I was employed by Pohjola Bank, which might have caused conflicts of interest (cf. Silverman 2010a). In order to demonstrate the independence of the study in relation to my employer, I ensured the interviewees that Pohjola Bank was not among the participating companies in the interviews and that Pohjola Bank was not in any way holding a primacy position in relation to learning about the research findings; the findings would not be revealed until the date of the public defense.

As I did not want to guide or intervene in the naturally occurring sales meetings in any way, I did not reveal the main focus of my study before conducting the interviews; I explained only that I was interested in salesperson–customer interaction in a business-to-business context. This is also the reason why each individual participated only once in the study. During the research interview, they would learn the focus of my study, and this would have potentially affected their thinking and actions in other forthcoming sales meetings. I wanted to stay as close as possible to naturally occurring activities in order to delve into the interviewees' everyday lives and keep their answers as close to practice as possible (cf. Silverman 2010a). When the salespersons informed me of the time and place of the sales meeting, they also gave me the customer representative's/representatives' contact information. I called the

customer representatives, ensured that they had been informed of the confidentiality and anonymity issues by the salesperson, arranged a time for the individual interview and promised to send the general presentation of the study (see Appendix 1).

Some of the processes started sooner than others. With one company, I started conducting the interviews in the beginning of April 2011, and with another, it took until the end of September 2011 to arrange a sales meeting. This means that when I started the first interviews, I was still trying to arrange more of them at the same time.

After active recruiting attempts, five companies selling HR services participated in the study. Three of the companies offered one sales meeting each for the study, one offered two, and one offered three (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Participating companies.

Altogether, 13 companies were involved in the empirical part of the study (Figure 6). Through five selling companies, eight buying companies participated in the research. Fortunately, I did not end up in the troublesome situation of two selling companies suggesting the same buying company and contact person for the study. The eventual number of participating companies and individuals was affected by practical considerations (Silverman 2010a). Complicated and time-consuming access to sales meetings limited the number of studied sales meetings and partly affected theoretical saturation in its purest form (cf. Charmaz 2006; Isabella, 1990).

The salespersons had various reasons for meeting with a particular customer representative. Table 3 presents background information on the meetings.

Table 3 The setting of the sales meetings.

Dyad no.	Selling company	No of SPs in the meeting	Reason to meet	→ Continuation	No. of CRs in the meeting	Buying company
Dyad #1	Selling company #1	2	Presenting an offer	Implementation phase due to a successful sale	1	Buying company #1
Dyad #2	Selling company #1	1	Staying in touch	Preparing an offer	1	Buying company #2
Dyad #3	Selling company #2	1	Staying in touch	Staying in touch	1	Buying company #3
Dyad #4	Selling company #3	1	Staying in touch	Staying in touch	1	Buying company #4
Dyad #5	Selling company #4	1	Staying in touch	Staying in touch	1	Buying company #5
Dyad #6	Selling company #4	1	Staying in touch	Preparing an offer	2	Buying company #6
Dyad #7	Selling company #4	2	Staying in touch	Staying in touch	1	Buying company #7
Dyad #8	Selling company #5	2	Staying in touch	Preparing an offer	1	Buying company #8

(SP=Salesperson; CR=Customer Representative)

Altogether, eight sales meetings or eight matched dyads were included in the study (Table 3). In three of the sales meetings, there were two salespersons present, and in five sales meetings, one salesperson was present. In one of the meetings, there were two customer representatives. In seven of the eight meetings, the reason to meet was to stay in touch after a short or long absence of conducting business projects together. In one of the meetings, the salespersons went through an offer with the customer. The sales meetings ended with one of the following three agreed ways to continue: to keep staying in touch, to prepare an offer or, in one case, to start attending to practical details due to a successful sale.

It is difficult to assess how this kind of data collection process affects what kind of dyads end up becoming part of the data. First of all, I randomly contacted CEOs and Senior Consultants, and some of them wanted to participate; secondly, these key persons or gatekeepers then selected and appointed potential salespersons as participants from the company; thirdly, some of these potential participants eventually participated in the research; and fourthly, the participating salespersons were free to select any meeting with any customer to be included in the study. I assume the gatekeepers did not appoint poorly performing salespersons for the study so as to avoid giving an unwanted impression of their company; on the other hand, perhaps they did not select the best salespersons either as their time might be more valuable when used for selling rather than for research. Furthermore, the salespersons may have preferred selecting meetings with customer representatives they liked, although meetings with totally new customer representatives were also included in the study. As the participating salespersons were not aware of the exact research focus prior to the sales meetings, they could only have tried to guess (in case they had interest in affecting the sample) what kind of a customer and meeting they would provide to the study. Nevertheless, none of these salespersons were able to predict how the upcoming meeting would actually go.

In general, the salespersons who participated in the study were motivated as participation required work from their side: asking for the customer representatives' willingness to participate, to operate the audio recorder during the sales meeting, and to participate in a research interview.

In the following subchapter, I will present details of the study sample regarding the 11 salespersons and nine customer representatives.

4.3.2 *Interviewees*

Altogether, 20 individuals were included in the collection of data: 11 salespersons and nine customer representatives. Participant details of the salespersons are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Study sample / Salespersons.

Name	Job title	Gender	Age (yrs)	Selling experience (yrs)	No. of meetings/month	Years with empl.	No. of personnel
George	Training Consultant	Male	42	17	40	1	P3
Allison	Senior Consultant	Female	48	15	20	< 1	P4
William	Training Consultant	Male	50	25	8	1	P1
Bob	Senior Consultant	Male	51	24	12	7	P2
James	Sales Consultant	Male	28	4	40	1	P3
Fred	Key Account Manager	Male	50	27	15	11	P3
Michael	Training Consultant	Male	40	7	8	7	P2
Rick	Senior Consultant	Male	55	30	8	< 1	P4
Mary	Senior Consultant	Female	41	3	5	4	P4
Paul	Training Consultant	Male	46	10	4	< 1	P2
Susan	Training Consultant	Female	50	25	8	2	P2

(Note: Names are pseudonyms. Meeting=Sales meeting. Number of personnel: P1= < 10; P2= 10–50; P3= 51–100; P4= > 100)

The salespersons involved in the study (Table 4) act as both salespersons and as trainers/consultants, meaning that they generally also implement what they sell to the customers. The salespersons vary notably in their years of selling experience and number of sales meetings they have each month.

Participant details of the customer representatives are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Study sample / Customer representatives.

Name	Level of responsibility	Gender	Age (yrs.)	No. of meetings/month	Years with empl.	No. of personnel
Chris	Executive level	Male	45	1–2	10	P3
Violet	Executive level	Female	48	5	10	P4
Ellen	Executive level	Female	54	1	10	P3
Kate	Manager level	Female	45	1	9	P3
Robin	Executive level	Male	48	1	1	P2
Melissa	Executive level	Female	47	2	12	P4
Sabine	Manager level	Female	59	4	20	P4
Brian	Executive level	Male	55	2–3	4	P2
Bess	Manager level	Female	59	2	7	P3

(Note: Names are pseudonyms. Meeting=Sales meeting. Number of personnel: P1= < 10; P2= 10–50; P3= 51–100; P4= > 100)

Customer representatives have at maximum five meetings a month with salespersons from various selling companies (Table 5). Accidentally, I knew two of the salespersons and one of the customer representatives beforehand.

The interpersonal and company-level backgrounds related to the sales meetings varied as well. Table 6 presents information on each dyad in the study sample.

Table 6 The relations between individuals and companies in the study sample.

Dyad no.	Have the selling and buying companies done business together before?	Do the individuals already know each other?	Has the particular CR purchased something from the particular SP before?	Have two individuals done business together before, representing other companies?
Dyad #1 SP & CR	Yes	No	No	No
Dyad #2 SP & CR	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Dyad #3 SP & CR	No	Yes	No	Yes
Dyad #4 SP & CR	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Dyad #5 SP-1 & CR-1 SP-2 & CR-1	No No	Yes No	No No	No No
Dyad #6 SP-1 & CR-1 SP-1 & CR-2	Yes Yes	Yes No	Yes No	No No
Dyad #7 SP-1 & CR-1 SP-2 & CR-1	Yes Yes	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
Dyad #8 SP-1 & CR-1 SP-2 & CR-1	Yes Yes	Yes No	Yes No	No No

Considered from a company-level perspective, most of the companies represented in the sales meetings had been doing business together also earlier (Table 6). Although the companies were familiar with each other in general, the individuals representing the companies in the sales meetings were not always familiar with each other. And even though in some cases the companies had not been doing business together, the individuals representing those companies had been involved in mutual business projects earlier while representing other companies. Most of the sales meetings occurred between salespersons and customer representatives who had never signed any business deals together; in other words, the customer representative had not bought anything from the salesperson before.

To sum up, the study sample offered a rich and versatile ground from which to study how individuals appreciate sales meetings: participants of different genders and ages were included who also had a varying amount of experience and who represented companies of various sizes. The number of sales

meetings the participants participated in on a monthly basis varied as well. In addition to the individual participant details, the details of each matched dyad varied: some of the represented companies had done business together and some had not, some salespersons had sold something to the customer representatives earlier and some had not, some salespersons knew the customer representatives beforehand and some did not, and some of the participants had done business together earlier but when representing companies other than the ones they represented at the time of these sales meetings.

Regardless of the exact point of the sales meeting in the selling process and/or the familiarity between the parties in business or in other contexts, the interview answers were more similar than different in comparison. As the more detailed construction of the grounded theory in the next chapter will show, the examples, opinions, and emphases the interviewees offered in the interviews share clear integrating characteristics.

4.3.3 *Audio recordings of the sales meetings*

My goal was to keep the sales meetings that were collected as part of the data as natural as possible. Using a digital audio recorder allowed me to “access” the sales meetings without being present and intervening them too much. In practice, I met with the salespersons before the sales meeting and handed them a small audio recorder. I taught them how to use it, and every recording was done successfully and the recorders were promptly returned to me.

Had I been physically present, it would have disturbed the natural flow and level of confidentiality of the meetings. It would also have been extremely difficult to gain access to be physically present in the sales meetings. Especially in the context of HR services, sensitive subjects are very often discussed, such as challenges within the personnel and problems with their performance. To summarize, observation was not an option. After all, I was interested in what the participants themselves thought, which cannot be “observed” from outside. Having my ear on the table in the form of an audio recorder was a suitable way to learn about the context and content of the sales meetings.

I did not reveal the focus of my research to the participants prior to the sales meetings. This is reflected in a comment that begins an audio recording:

“We do not know at all what we should say to the recorder, so let’s just be like we usually are.” (Salesperson)

The comment also points to a fact that most participants told me in the research interviews. At the beginning of the sales meetings, the participants were very much aware of the recorder. However, after a few minutes, they

forgot the little machine was even there and continued the rest of the meeting in a natural way.

One of the salespersons strongly felt that the audio recording disturbed the natural flow of the sales meeting. The salesperson stated that the discussion was too formal and not natural and he was uncertain whether the goals of the sales meeting were achieved due to the presence of the audio recording. On the other hand, his counterpart, the customer representative, had a different perspective. When asked whether there were any disturbing elements or friction in the meeting, the customer representative did not refer to the audio recording or consciously thinking about the fact that the sales meeting was part of a research project. Instead, the customer representative stated that perhaps they would have been able to reach a conclusion sooner if the salesperson had had an agenda or structure for the meeting.

Prior to individually interviewing the salespersons and customer representatives, I listened through the audio recordings of the sales meetings. Listening through the recordings was a very effective way to imagine the actual sales meetings and built an understanding of their contents and participants. While listening, I wrote a meeting summary of the themes and conclusions the participants were discussing during the sales meeting.

At the end of each individual interview, I showed the meeting summary to the interviewee. The purpose of showing the summary was to help the interviewee to think back and check whether there was something he still wanted to add or clarify. I did not show the summaries to the interviewees at the beginning of the interviews because they might have framed and affected the interviewee's way of thinking and resulting answers. In general, the summaries did not provoke new thoughts or things that interviewees might have forgotten to mention earlier in the interviews.

4.3.4 Conducting the interviews

Interviews were chosen as the primary method for constructing an understanding of what individuals appreciate related to a sales meeting. Interviewing a salesperson or a customer representative face-to-face provided a way to learn and discuss the interviewees' experiences. The interviews were conducted as intensive interviews (Charmaz 2006). Intensive interviews are in-depth explorations of a person's experience and interpretation of the experience.

In the spirit of constructionism, I regarded each of the interviews as a particular setting (Silverman 2010b). My interaction with the interviewee within that setting resulted in the particular representation the interviewee

chose to tell about his experiences. Therefore, the interviewee's answers were the result of our mutual construction in the interview setting based on the interviewee's interpretations of his experiences (Charmaz 2006). In sum, constructionists regard interview answers as "displays of perspectives" instead of "true or false reports on reality" (Silverman 2010b, 144; see also Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

Both the salespersons and the customer representatives were individually interviewed for approximately one hour within a week's time of their particular sales meetings. For practical reasons, it was not possible to arrange the interviews right after the sales meetings. Due to the business representatives busy schedules it was often demanding even to find an available time for the interview within the next seven days. During the open-ended intensive interviews, the interviewees were encouraged to reflect back to the particular sales meeting – this was to underscore that the focus of the interviews was not on the interviewee's overall opinions on sales meetings in general but that the focus was on one actual sales meeting that had taken place a couple of days prior to the interview. The interviews were audio recorded. I will now turn to a discussion of me as a researcher conducting interviews, the structure of the research interviews, and the nature of the interviews.

According to Blumer (1969), if a researcher as an interviewer and observer aims to understand something of another person's actions, the researcher first needs to grasp the person's world, which is filled with the objects to which the person has assigned meanings and that guide the individual's orientations and actions. Although the research participants' worlds and experiences cannot be replicated, I attempted to achieve as much of an inside view of their experiences as possible (Charmaz 2006).

My training as a certified business coach helped me to conduct the individual interviews smoothly and to encourage the interviewees to talk about their inner thoughts (Charmaz 2006; Silverman 2010a). I applied the core competencies stated by the International Coach Federation⁶. For example, I applied the coaching presence, which refers to the ability to be fully conscious and go with one's own gut feeling. The coaching presence also entails an open and flexible interaction with the interviewee. Tolerating silence during the interviews was familiar for me based on my experience as a business coach. When the interviewee filled the silence with an answer, I encouraged him to keep on talking. The core competencies of a coach transfer well to the required skills of a researcher conducting research interviews. Particularly open-ended interviews demand the researcher to be flexible, build rapport, ask non-judgmental

⁶ Source: <http://www.coachfederation.org/credential/landing.cfm?ItemNumber=2206andnavItemNumber=576> (retrieved June 10th, 2013).

questions, and engage in active listening (Charmaz 2006; Silverman 2010b). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) label this as “the active interview” during which the interviewer, for example, helps the interviewee to adopt various roles and to address topics from differing viewpoints. During the interviews, I also repeated the interviewee’s key words in my questions. This was a means to build a connection between the interviewee’s meanings and my research questions. This way of connecting with the interviewee is advised both by academic scholars (e.g. Charmaz 2006) and by the International Coach Federation.

One of the interviewees offered the following feedback for me regarding the interview we had just had:

“Well, I think it was fantastic, that is, I was often surprised, that you remembered word-by-word some of the things I had said even though you did not write everything down. It was a sign for me that you were genuinely interested in hearing and understanding what another person is saying and for me that is the most important thing here. You respect what another person is saying. For me you were calm, respecting, correct, persistent.”
(Salesperson)

My background as a CRM and HRD Manager and familiarity with the research setting from the business perspective was a resource I was able to use during the interviews and all throughout the process of analysis. This background knowledge allowed me to better understand the interviewees’ viewpoints and to pose questions that I knew would be relevant for the interviewees (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Thus, the interviews were meaningful for the interviewees, which in itself prompted the interviewees to provide interesting accounts and descriptions of their daily work. As expressed by a customer representative and a salesperson:

“When you think about a meeting from the viewpoint of interaction, it is useful, I gained something from just starting to analyse a particular meeting.” (Kate, CR)

“It is terribly useful to analyse this stuff the way we have been doing in this interview.” (Bob, SP)

The structure of the one-hour interviews was the same for every interviewee (for the Interview Guide, see Appendix 2). The main aim of the interviews was to recognize any objects that the interviewees might indicate as having value related to the particular sales meeting. I did not guide or restrict the interview questions or answers according to any preset frameworks; I had an open mind to any individually appreciated elements the interviewees wanted

to raise. All interviewees were asked about their own interpretations and were also asked to assess the interpretation of the other person (Table 7).

Table 7 Structure and content of the interviews in a concise form.

Interviewee	Prior to the meeting	Related to the minutes of the meeting	Deepening the understanding related to gains
1) Own perspective:			
Salesperson	“What did I expect to gain?”	“What did I gain?”	“Is something different now that I have gained that something?”
Customer representative			
2) Assessing the other person’s perspective:			
Salesperson	“What did the other person expect to gain?”	“What did the other person gain?”	“Is something different now that the other person has gained that something?”
Customer representative			

In a conversational interviewing style, I asked both the salespersons and the customer representatives about their expectations regarding gains related to the sales meeting (Table 7). I also asked both of them to tell about what they had gained related to the minutes of the sales meeting and whether the appointed gains carried particular meaning for the interviewees. The perspective of reciprocal assessments was also applied; for example, the salesperson was asked to assess what the customer representative had expected to gain related to the sales meeting and vice versa.

In detail, I asked the interview questions in order to delve into the individually appointed gains of the sales meeting; examples include: What did you gain from the meeting? What was significant or important for you in the meeting? What was beneficial or fruitful for you in some way? By using and repeating the interviewees’ words and phrases during the interviews, I was able to get deeper into the interviewees’ world and to learn about their views, experienced events, and actions (cf. Charmaz 2006)

I also asked every respondent to assess what the other person – participating in the same meeting – had expected to gain and did gain from the particular sales meeting. For example, I asked a salesperson to assess what the customer representative he met had expected of the sales meeting beforehand and vice versa. This question – assessing the other person’s thought and feelings – made every respondent grin.

While the interviewees listed the expected gains and actual gains, I wrote them down. In order to understand the gains more deeply (the last column of Table 7), I explored the list one gain at a time with the interviewee. For every gain the interviewee had mentioned, I asked: “What made you mention it?”; “In what ways do you consider it a gain?”; “Is something different now that you have received the gain?”.

Throughout the interview process, an emerging understanding of the phenomenon allowed me to leave out some interview questions that did not seem relevant. The evolving interview questions stand as an example of the flexibility of a qualitative study (Charmaz 2006). Following the characteristic of grounded theory interviewing, the more interviews I conducted, the more focused and narrower my list of questions became (Charmaz 2006). I could also allocate more time to the core questions as I needed to be efficient time-wise during the interviews. I was also even emboldened to get answers from interviewees to questions that startled them:

“Help! ... Well, yes, I think about it that, if...” (Salesperson)

The questions that left the respondents quiet for a long while were actually the most intriguing ones. In addition, when I asked for further description about obvious things, the interviewees provided vivid answers after being puzzled for a while, as the following extract of a discussion from an interview shows:

“You just said that what you gained was an approval from the customer. What do you actually get when you get an approval?”
(Interviewer)

“This is interesting. This is a very good question. An approval, what it means for me is --- Actually, an approval contains a lot, it is a big word.” (Salesperson)

All of the 20 interviews were rich in nature. Most of the interviewees were able to concentrate on the overall topic of the interview, and they provided answers to the questions posed. I was at times surprised how well especially the salespersons remembered the flow of a certain sales meeting in detail. Perhaps the salespersons and customer representatives paid more attention memory-wise to these meetings than to meetings in general as they knew during the sales meetings that I would be later interviewing them in relation to the meetings.

There were five interesting interviews – three with salespersons and two with customer representatives – that differed from the other 15 interviews. One of the salespersons had great difficulty in limiting his answers to the particular sales meeting. He eagerly started talking about the company’s service development projects and other contacts. As this started to seriously

slow down the progress of the interview, I tried to anchor his thoughts over and over again to the specific meeting;

“Was it on Monday you met? Was it so that you met in the afternoon, from two to three o’clock? About the meeting you had with customer x... Did you go into a negotiation room?”

Another salesperson did not feel comfortable with the sales vocabulary I was using at the beginning of the interview. In her view, professional services cannot be sold in the traditional sense of selling. I got the impression that for the salesperson, selling carries a somewhat “cheap” connotation that cannot be related to professional services. I modified my own vocabulary in such a way that we could carry on smoothly with the interview.

The third interviewee who differed from the general group was a salesperson who was explicitly disappointed with the sales meeting and its result. Otherwise he had the ability of interestingly illustrating events with an enthusiastic look. However, when we concentrated on the particular sales meeting, he looked bored and did not try to make an effort to try to present the meeting in any better light than it had been for him.

The fourth interesting interview was a customer representative who talked a lot. The talk was about his long history with the company and all kinds of significant events during that time. Although he always started to answer my questions using only a few words, he had soon surrounded us with his vivid memories. However, towards the end of the interview, he started concentrating more on the questions I was asking. My impression was that it was important for the person to be heard and to be understood through his long history with the company. As I had respected that and had given the impression that I was listening and was interested, he became satisfied. Only after that was he willing to genuinely participate in the interview.

The fifth interview that differed from the rest was among the last ones I conducted. Fortunately so because the customer representative did not at all feel comfortable in describing how she felt about things. She did not want to explain things any further; for her, facts were enough. As I noticed her uncomfortable look and hesitant answers, I asked her for her opinion regarding the nature of the interview. She frankly told me that she was not used to looking at things from her personal side. I asked her whether she wanted to call off the interview or to carry on staying at the level of facts. As she wanted to go on with the facts, I changed the nature of the interview so that she could be comfortable with me and the interview questions for the next half an hour. If this had been my first interview, I would have been very perplexed whether this would be the general attitude of all the respondents. Luckily, I had conducted 17 interviews before meeting her, so I was confident that this was a somewhat exceptional situation.

I took field notes in relation to every interviewee (cf. Silverman 2010a). This means I gathered 20 files, each of which included my perceptions and ideas related mainly to the time of conducting the research interview and listening through the audio recorded research interview while transcribing it. Each file was around one page long and can be regarded as contact summaries (Miles and Huberman 1994). I sequentially numbered each field note/file together with the month and year of writing them. The field notes served as a means to strengthen my understanding of the context and to help me remember thoughts that crossed my mind at the time of the interviews. Thus, the field notes provide invaluable data that I can now use for synthesizing a coherent understanding of the sales meetings, their participants, and the interviews. The field notes reminded me that the interviewees were true professionals in their fields and they were ready to share their thoughts and even found the interviews themselves to be of value.

I also wrote numerous short and long analytical memos on the basis of listening to the audio-recorded sales meetings while transcribing the interviews and all along the coding process. The memos provided a way to write down even the smallest of ideas and to reflect them in the emerging categories (Charmaz 2006).

During a few discussions at international academic conferences and research seminars, I was asked about the “overly positive tune” of my empirical data. None of the sales meetings included in the research turned out to be disasters or to evoke strong negative associations. Instead, one of the eight included sales meetings resulted in a sale and the rest ensured the continuation of the relationships. In general, the participants of the sales meetings held neutral or positive feelings and thoughts regarding the meetings. Did this imply that people found sales meetings valuable only when they were conducted with a positive or neutral spirit?

In order to challenge the understanding I was constructing, I decided to conduct *validating interviews*. I decided to look for especially poor sales meetings to be discussed in the validating interviews. The validating interviews offered an opportunity to challenge my emerging understanding of the data (Silverman 2010b).

In the spring of 2013, I randomly asked my HR colleagues at OP-Pohjola Group to think back as to whether they had experienced poor or unsatisfactory business-to-business sales meetings either as customer representatives or as salespersons. Fortunately for my research purposes, five volunteers wanted to share their memories of a poor sales meeting with me. Four of them provided information from the customer representative point of view, and one provided a salesperson’s view on a sales meeting. I did not reveal the reason for my interviews to the interviewees beforehand. I talked individually with each

volunteer for about half an hour. I asked the interviewee to openly describe the situation to me. In line with the original interview structure, I asked the interviewees to describe what they had gained from the meeting. I did not audio record the interviews; instead I took notes. These validating interviews were included in the data analysis process.

4.4 Process of data analysis

The process of analyzing the data is discussed separately from the collection of data. However, as is characteristic of a grounded theory study (Glaser and Strauss 1967), both the collection and analysis of data occur simultaneously and inform each other. This means that in practice, I was constructing an understanding of the phenomenon while occupied with data analysis and data collection activities.

The process of analyzing the data is about interpreting interpretations. Even though during research interviews interviewees provide their views on various issues, these views do not capture or offer direct access to an interviewee's "genuine" and "original" experiences (Silverman 2010a). The interview answers stand as the interviewee's interpretations at the time of the interview, which I then interpret. Therefore, the resulting grounded theory is not a reproduction of interviewees' genuine feelings and experiences (Charmaz 2006). Under these guidelines I have aimed to understand the interviewees' views by taking as much of an insider role as possible in order to construct a representative grounded theory. The perspective of the research participants has been my main motivator while analyzing the data. The various methods used for analyzing the data are illustrated in Figure 7.

(Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). At the same time, I constructed a basis for the second phase of coding, focused coding (Charmaz 2006)⁷.

I preliminarily placed the phrase-by-phrase codes under one of two working labels: “prior to the meeting” and “during the meeting” (see Figure 8). Both of the labels also had two sub-labels: “what did I (expect to) gain” and “what did the other one (expect to) gain.” Here is a random example of phrase-to-phrase coding that belongs under the label of “during the meeting”:

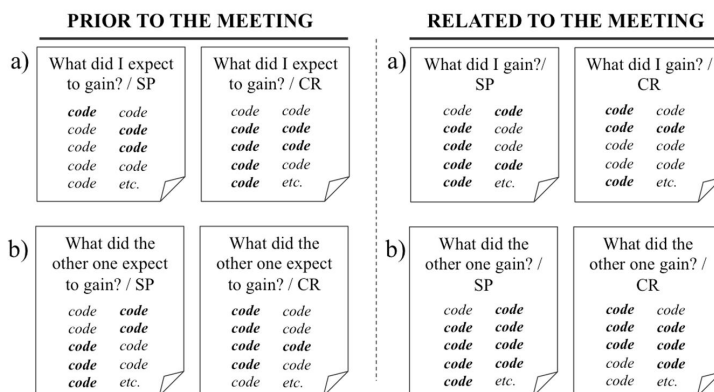
Interview answer consisting of two phrases: “(1) Feelings, you know that one has a relaxed, relaxed feeling. (2) And that the person was . . . that we were on the same wave length, yes.”

→ Two codes: 1) relaxed feeling and 2) being on the same wave length.

The coding example results in two codes – relaxed feeling and being on the same wave length – which belong to the working label “during the meeting”, and more specifically to the sub-label “what did I gain”. I aimed to keep the codes close to the interviewees’ vocabulary and to let the codes reflect the interviewees’ own perspectives (Charmaz 2006). Generally, I aimed for short codes illustrating actions. I chose to have longer ones as well in case the phrase pointed to a process or the phrase was particularly rich in detail. Overall, I followed the guidelines of grounded theory and captured specific behaviors in codes instead of capturing types of people (Glaser 1978).

After going through all the phrases in all the interviews, I had listed hundreds of codes and located them preliminarily under the working labels and sub-labels. The codes were also earmarked with information as to whether they originated from a salesperson or customer representative interview. Figure 8 illustrates the overall construction of coding at the stage of initial coding.

⁷ As my native language is not English, I chose to use my native language (Finnish) all through the process of analyzing. It allowed me to stay close to the empirical reality and expressions of the Finnish-speaking respondents as well as supported the construction of sensitive, yet analytic categories (cf. Charmaz 2006).



(SP=Salesperson; CR=Customer Representative)

Figure 8 An illustration of initial coding.

The bolded codes in Figure 8 represent focused codes. Focused coding is the second phase of coding, which consists of choosing the most useful initial codes to be included in further analysis (Charmaz 2006). During focused coding, I also combined some initial codes into more condensed focused codes.

When I moved from initial coding to the phase of focused coding, I started seeing some initial patterns. I also noticed that coding the interviews and selecting the most significant and representative codes was demanding. I did not want to lose the connections between codes and the context to which they were attached. This is the reason why I wrote numerous comments in the margins of the papers where I had collected the codes.

The primary focus on the most cited elements does not mean that the least cited elements were altogether abandoned. Actually, going through occasional and diverging comments broadened my understanding of the backgrounds of the business representatives and of the context of their daily work. These kinds of “mismatching” comments also helped in challenging the strength of the emerging categories (Goulding 2009). This was also a phase that really challenged me as a researcher who had chosen the approach of grounded theory. I was pushed to my limits regarding the “ability to conceptualize data, an ability to tolerate some confusion, and an ability to tolerate confusion’s attendant regression” (Glaser, 1999, 838).

The categorization focused on the most cited elements across the data. Thus, the resulting categorization is “a collective interpretational portrait” (Isabella, 1990, 31; see also Charmaz 2006) of the sales meetings. Although the portrait is collective, it is constructed of individual interpretations involv-

ing the interpretations of salespersons, customer representatives, and myself. Eventually the subjective can be linked to the social (Charmaz 2009).

At this stage of analyzing the data, my general impression was that I was studying something of a highly dynamic and “unorganized” nature. The interviewees’ answers could not be understood as referrals to static elements or to clear chains of effects. On the contrary, a lot was going on under the surface that was lively and did not allow itself to be limited by time frames or straightforward linkages.

4.4.2 Constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and saturation

Constant comparison and theoretical sampling are two key concepts in grounded theory (Cutcliffe, 2000; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Constant comparison is about comparing data in a seamless way all through the data collection and analysis. Theoretical sampling means adjusting the process of collecting new data on the basis of the emerging understanding (cf. Suddaby, 2006).

The aim of constant comparison is to strengthen and evaluate emerging properties, categories, and patterns that are the building blocks of grounded theory (Goulding 2009). In addition to collecting and analyzing data simultaneously, “each item of data is compared with every other item of data” (Cutcliffe, 2000, 1477). Constant comparative analysis may also take the form of making comparisons between groups of people (Glaser and Strauss 1967). An emerging category based on one comparison group (salespersons) may be compared with another (customer representatives) and, as a result, the category is supported or requires modification.

My empirical research had a built-in constant comparison since it was a matched, dyadic study. Salespersons formed one comparison group and customer representatives the other. During the process of analyzing, I continually compared the categories and their properties between salespersons’ and customer representatives’ answers. In addition to directly comparing the salespersons’ and the customer representatives’ views, overall the salespersons’ answers helped me to understand the customer representatives’ views better and vice versa. Specifically, I had asked the interviewees to assess what the other party had gained in relation to the meeting. These reciprocal assessments helped me to construct an understanding of the similarities and differences between the salespersons’ and the customer representatives’ answers. Thus, it was not only me but it was me and the salesperson trying to construct an understanding of the customer representative’s perspectives. This served as a

means of constant comparison as the reciprocal assessments helped me to challenge the emerging categories and processes.

Theoretical sampling is a means to delve more deeply into the data and to saturate it by considering what kind of data to collect next (Goulding 2009). Therefore, theoretical sampling is not an attempt to represent a population or to aim for statistical generalizability (Charmaz 2006). I began the collection of data with a pilot study. A pilot study is a way of doing initial sampling that will pave the way for theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2006; Cutcliffe, 2000). On the basis of the pilot study, I was confident that the audio recording would work well technically and provide an efficient way to learn about the sales meetings. The lessons from the pilot study helped me also with revising the main interview questions and settling on individual interviews instead of group interviews.

The nature and focus of sampling in my study can be characterized as a narrow sample. In comparison with a wider sample, a narrow one suits the needs of a researcher aiming to build a substantive theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The narrow sample is aimed to apply to one substantive group, which means sampling “groups of the same substantive type” (Cutcliffe, 2000, 1478).

In grounded theory, saturation is related to the saturation of categories. A category is saturated when additional data do not provide new properties to be added into a given category (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The category with its properties is part of the emerging theoretical understanding. A theoretically saturated category aids in constructing a coherent understanding of the studied action together with being related to other theoretically saturated categories. The signals of saturation are context-related and pragmatic (Suddaby, 2006). Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend studying more than one group in order to saturate categories. More precisely, “differences among groups” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 62) help to challenge the emerging categories and to eventually build strong and saturated categories.

4.4.3 Constructing conceptual and theoretical categories

While I progressed with analyzing the data and started constructing categories, I used certain elements of the interview data for certain purposes. This was not something I had decided to do before starting the process of analyzing. The idea to generate an understanding of the interview data in this manner emerged during the process of analyzing the data (Table 8).

Table 8 Interview elements and their usage in the process of analyzing data.

Element in the interviews	Main usage
Expected gains	Strengthening and challenging the emerging categories together with actual gains.
Reciprocal assessments of gains	Understanding the similarities and differences between comparison groups (constant comparison).
Actual gains	Strengthening and challenging the emerging categories together with expected gains.

I had collected rich data that offered pathways for many dissertations, as the interview elements show (Table 8). As I aimed to write only one dissertation with a clear focus, I needed to make choices: should I compare expected gains with actual gains, should I study how correctly people assess each others’ perspectives, are salespersons better with reciprocal assessments than customer representatives, or what are gains made of? I decided to stick to the original plan and concentrate on the nature of gains and to build a strong case for understanding the gains. The understanding of gains would then be challenged and strengthened by all other elements of and perspectives in the data.

While categorizing, I noticed that all the expected gains were actually included in the actual gains. In other words, all expectations that were mentioned during the research interviews were fulfilled (except for in the validating interviews). Thus, I decided to combine both the expected gains and actual gains. This combined perspective offered a holistic understanding of all gains that are related to sales meetings. The finding that all expected gains were amongst the actual gains was somewhat expected. It was presumable that when interviewees are asked about their expectations for gains in a retrospective manner, expectations can be mixed with the actual happenings and with everything that has happened since the specific event. As Silverman (2010a, 192) puts it: “we all view the past through the lens of the present” (see also Isabella, 1990).

As a result of the versatile and overlapping phases of analyzing the data, I began constructing basic, conceptual, and theoretical categories on the basis of focused codes. Figure 9 presents an illustration of the intertwined process of category construction.

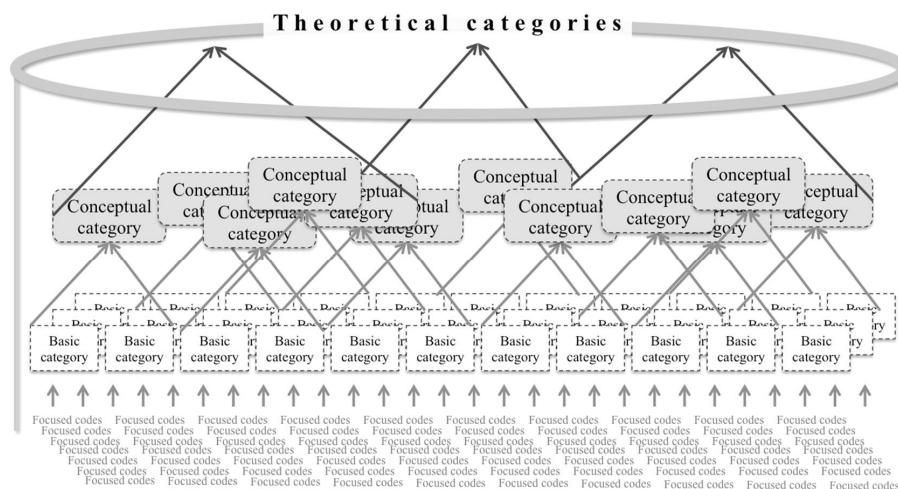


Figure 9 The construction of categories.

The categories closest to the empirical reality and focused codes were called *basic categories* (Figure 9). The basic categories were constructed of several interrelated properties, namely focused codes. Some of the basic categories were more intertwined than others and, as a result, I constructed a higher layer of categories, namely *conceptual categories*. Each of the conceptual categories comprised a certain group of basic categories. The conceptual categories were intertwined and pointed to two *theoretical categories* for their carrying capacity (Charmaz 2006). Eventually, the theoretical categories together with the conceptual categories represented a thorough understanding of the situation and stood for a substantive grounded theory (Charmaz 2006).

When I started labeling the conceptual categories, I aimed to shift the category labels from a descriptive level to a conceptual level (Silverman 2010a). Due to the fact that symbolic interactionism takes a processual view on causality, I chose to use gerunds (-ing forms) in the category labels. Gerunds highlight the processual nature of gains as they are in a state of becoming in contrast to being fixed states, static levels, or final outcomes that have been reached based on fixed chains of events (Charmaz 2006). Moreover, I focused on constructing both analytic and sensitizing categories: analytic enough to point to the characteristics of the properties of the categories and sensitizing enough to offer a representational illustration of the studied action (Glaser and Strauss 1967). When categories are both analytic and sensitizing, at their best they will help “the reader to see and hear vividly the people in the area under study, especially if it is a substantive area” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 39).

The process of analyzing the data generated several conceptual categories and two theoretical categories. In general, theoretical categories need to effectively depict data and serve as “interpretive frames and offer an abstract understanding of relationships” (Charmaz 2006, 140) within the data. The goal is to construct a condensed and strong core “around which all other categories are integrated” (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008, 165). A grounded theory of the studied action organizes the data and offers a meaningful interpretation of the empirical world.

5 ANALYZING THE DATA

The purpose of this study is to understand how salespersons and customer representatives appreciate sales meetings. Specifically, I aim to understand the nature of interaction-based value, the application of interaction-based value, and the levels and contexts of the application of value. I have adopted the subjective viewpoint of an individual to approach the phenomenon.

Observing and interviewing individuals in real situations provides a beginning for constructing an understanding from the subjective viewpoint (Charon 2010; Rock 1979). Any situation and an individual's definition of the situation can be regarded as a moving, ongoing process. Situations and definitions cannot ever be fully understood, but they may become "to some extent understandable through careful and systematic investigation" (Charon 2010, 207; see also Rock 1979).

The forthcoming discussion is based on audio recordings of the sales meetings, the research interviews, field notes, and analytic memos. I will present authentic and representative examples of the interviewees' answers and other quotes from discussion (Glaser and Strauss 1967) that resonate the connection between empirical material and basic, conceptual, and theoretical categories. The aim of "providing ample verbatim material" (Charmaz 2006, 82; see also Charmaz 2009) is to ground the resulting grounded theory strongly in the studied data.

After each quotation, I will cite a pseudonym representing the person who expressed the phrase together with an abbreviation: SP or CR. SP refers to a salesperson and CR to a customer representative. Field notes are abbreviated as FN and the audio recordings of the sales meetings as "AR, Person, SP/CR, Meeting #." In addition, I will use the term "gain" to refer to any object an interviewed individual has appreciated in relation to a sales meeting. I continue to use interaction-based value as a sensitizing concept in order to delve deeper into the world of individuals' appreciations.

I will also present extracts from the validating interviews as "Validating interview #, CR/SP". The validating interviews support the gains from a reversed perspective. When interviewees listed what went wrong in the unsatisfactory meetings, these negative points could be considered as aspects that should go well in a successful meeting and could be potentially appreciated by the interviewees.

I begin by considering the nature of interaction-based value, then move on to analyzing the application processes of interaction-based value and eventually to analyzing the levels and contexts of value application. In relation to each phase of analysis, I will also incorporate the interviewees' assessments of each other's perspectives.

5.1 The nature of interaction-based value

In this chapter, I will describe what salespersons and customer representatives gained in relation to sales meetings – in other words, what kind of interaction-based value they appreciated. In addition to describing one's own gains, each interviewee was asked to assess what the other person had gained. In other words, each salesperson assessed what the customer representative had gained and vice versa. These assessments are included in the discussions of gains: when salespersons' gains are analyzed, they are linked with customer representatives' assessments and vice versa. After analyzing the gains of both salespersons and customer representatives, I will compare the gains and discuss their similarities and differences.

In the research interviews, I first asked the interviewees about their expectations for gains to be gained from the sales meeting and then about the actual gains they had appreciated. As all the listed expected gains were included in the listing of actual gains (except for the validating interviews), I decided to analyze the gains as one group. This will add clarity to the discussion of the multifaceted gains as they are also described from both the salespersons' and the customer representatives' viewpoints.

5.1.1 *Interaction-based value from salespersons' perspectives*

Salespersons found it relatively easy to answer the question "what did you gain of the meeting?" In the words of a salesperson:

"Once again I gained so much." (Allison, SP)

Each salesperson began to easily list all kinds of value they had appreciated in relation to the meeting. However, it was more difficult for salespersons to think about what they had expected to gain prior to the meeting.

Based on focused coding, I listed all the gains that were most often cited in the research interviews. I termed these focused codes (in relation to gains) as value properties. I further grouped these value properties into forms of interaction-based value. The forms of interaction-based value serve as basic

categories and describe the nature of interaction-based value in an encompassing manner (Table 9).

Table 9 The salespersons' perspective on gains in relation to sales meetings: illustrative interview examples, value properties, and forms of interaction-based value.

Illustrative interview examples	Value properties (gains)		Forms of interaction-based value
<div></div>			
“Update on where the company is heading” (SP, Allison); “Understanding the style of the company” (SP, William)	Exchanging HR news Future plans Importance of partner network Information on the business sector	Recent development Style Update	Valuable business information
“I got a chance to present our company to the customer” (SP, Allison); “I got the customer’s time” (SP, George)	Time Presentation	Information on needs Chances	Salestask-related value
“It was a conversation between equal professionals” (SP, William); “A warm discussion” (SP, James)	Credibility Equality Exchanging ideas Happiness Openness	Respect Trust Understanding Warm and nice feelings	Interaction-related value
“I know now what kind of holes there are to fill” (SP, George); “A lead on whom to meet next” (SP, Paul)	Chances Enough understanding Interest Hunches Opportunities	Names A new theme A new meeting Lead Reference permission	Selling process-related value

Four forms of interaction-based value emerged as a result of categorization: valuable business information related to the buying company, sales task-related value, interaction-related value, and selling process-related value (see Table 9). The forms of interaction-based value comprise of what the salespersons gained in relation to the sales meetings and therefore describe the nature of interaction-based value. I will next discuss each form of interaction-based value in more detail. The particular forms of interaction-based value were also supported by the customer representatives' assessments of the salesperson's gains.

Salespersons appreciated hearing *Valuable business information* during the sales meeting. It is appreciated by salespersons when customer representatives share information about the buying company's recent development and future plans. Salespersons also find it valuable to learn details about the buying company's business sector, end customers, and partner network. The nature of business information as an appreciated entity was also supported by customer representatives in their individual interviews:

"He received a detailed view of our current situation." (Melissa, CR)

"An understanding of what might be." (Brian, CR)

"He got a chance to hear what we need and what themes are important to us now." (Ellen, CR)

In the research interviews, salespersons brought up gains that were related to the agenda and goal of the specific sales meeting. I termed these gains as *Salestask-related value*. First of all, the salesperson appreciates getting or receiving the customer's time. The salesperson's ability to get a hold on the customer and to be able to book a meeting is not easy, as expressed by customer representatives:

"I try to avoid them [salespeople] actively." (Bess, CR)

"All kinds of salespeople contact me actively. Nowadays I can turn them down in advance. I need to know that in case I invest an hour of my time into a meeting, it will offer me something." (Kate, CR)

"A meeting takes always some of my restricted time; I don't meet anyone just for the fun of it; the threshold for agreeing to have a meeting is quite high." (Violet, CR)

"I get phone calls weekly, and people try to sell me this and that. I have a strict line; I say no, there is so much of everything." (Brian, CR)

During the precious sales meeting time, the salesperson appreciates the chance to promote his selling agenda. Salespersons find it valuable to be able to provide more information about themselves and about the selling company they are representing. Some customer representatives touched on this theme in their respective interviews as well:

"He expected an opportunity to explain more about the business they are doing and how we might use them in our projects." (Ellen, CR)

“They were marketing their company and their competencies.”
(Susan, CR)

However, although the salesperson may have a somewhat fixed agenda for the meeting in his mind, he needs to adjust his mental agenda to the needs of the customer. Although the salesperson may be eager to promote his case, he needs to stay alert and flexibly change his mind set about the meeting if the customer signals a need for it:

“I suggested a new process for carrying out the workshop. As this did not conform to the salesperson’s ideas, he got very irritated. The salesperson was very indignant, and I was thinking to myself which one of us is the customer here.” (Validating interview #1, CR)

In addition, it is important that the salesperson finds the right balance between marketing his own company and being interested in the customer representative and the buying company:

“All of a sudden, there was no room for the customer’s need in the meeting. The salesperson did not ask about my needs at all. The salesperson explained his products in detail. I think he needed desperately to sell just anything and to impress his superior, who was also present.” (Validating interview #2, CR)

Salespersons also described gains in relation to the communication and feelings between the salesperson and customer representative. I grouped these gains as *Interaction-related value*. Feelings such as equality, happiness, and trust were very much present in every interviewees’ answers.

“It was nice talking with the salesperson.” (Kate, CR)

“The dynamics was good.” (Brian, CR)

Interaction-related value is based on a natural body language and equal communication between the salesperson and the customer representative. The salesperson is expected to be interested in the customer representative and the buying company. The product and the product presentation should not stand in between the salesperson and the customer representative and the chemistry between them:

“The salesperson was reading directly from the papers. He did not listen to me, the customer, at all. Ideally, a salesperson should listen, and by asking further questions, the salesperson can show that he understands the customer’s everyday life and needs. Then the willingness of becoming closer intensifies.”
(Validating interview #2, CR)

Selling process-related value refers to gains that support the continuation of the selling process. Selling process-related value connects the particular sales meeting to a forthcoming meeting and therefore ensures that there will be a new meeting. Gains that support the continuation of the process involve aspects such as leads, names, reference permissions, and overall interest from the customer representative's side. These gains are appreciated by the salesperson as they represent the building blocks for the construction of an offering and proposal. This aspect is also echoed by customer representatives:

"He was expecting to make a proposal based on what I would tell him." (Christopher, CR)

"He will draft a proposal based on our meeting." (Kate, CR)

I was surprised that salespersons easily provided a list of things they had appreciated. At the beginning of the overall interview process, each interview session seemed to present differing views on gains, but the more interviews I conducted and simultaneously analyzed, the more condensed and homogeneous the answers seemed to get. The individual answers actually represented differing perspectives on common themes. I was beginning to "find the collective in the subjective" (Charmaz 2006, 175).

To sum up, interaction in sales meetings generates four forms of interaction-based value that salespersons themselves indicate as appreciable. Three of the forms are strongly grounded in the particular context and time of a single sales meeting; as salespersons appreciate information about the buying company, they appreciate that the sales meeting provides a time and place for contributing their sales agenda, and they find a way of interacting appreciable in many ways. In comparison, the fourth form of interaction-based value – selling process -related value – is attached to the overall long-term selling process. Hence, the sales meeting is a part of a longer process, and the gains from this sales meeting build a bridge for the future. I now turn to a discussion of the customer representatives' gains.

5.1.2 *Interaction-based value from customer representatives' perspectives*

Customer representatives found it somewhat difficult to answer the interview questions "What did you expect to gain from the meeting?" and "What did you gain from the meeting?" However, after some hesitation, the interviewees started listing gains.

As with the salespersons, I organized the customer representatives' interview data into gains that were most often cited in the research interviews. I termed these focused codes as value properties. I further grouped these value

properties into forms of interaction-based value. The forms of interaction-based value serve as basic categories and describe the nature of interaction-based value in an encompassing manner (Table 10).

Table 10 The customer representatives' perspective on value in relation to sales meetings: illustrative interview examples, value properties, and forms of interaction-based value.

Illustrative interview examples	Value properties (gains)		Forms of interaction-based value
→			
“The investments the company has made in developing their competencies” (CR, Violet); “Follows the market and is perhaps ahead of others” (CR, Bess)	Ahead of competition Business-related themes	Information Investments Inputs Update	Valuable business information
“I heard more details on his expertise and perspectives” (CR, Ellen); “The salesperson was able to grasp our thinking” (CR, Sabine)	Competencies Credibility Experience Flexible thinking Genuine interest	Listener Personality Perspectives Pleasant Update	Salesperson-related value
“He always offers something new” (CR, Bess); “He suggested various options” (CR, Ellen)	Challenges Concreteness Ideas Insights	New elements Options Thought-provoking	Valuable insights
“It was easy to talk, there was no guiding, no interruptions” (CR, Violet); “The salesperson asked enough questions” (CR, Robin)	Activity Atmosphere Attentiveness Business-wise questions Easiness Enough questions	Equal conversation Friendliness Openness Proactiveness Same conceptual thinking	Interaction-related value

On the basis of the customer representatives' answers, four forms of interaction-based value were constructed: valuable business information, salesperson-related value, valuable insights, and interaction-related value (see Table 10). These forms of interaction-based value comprise what the customer representatives gained in relation to the sales meetings. Next, I will describe every form of interaction-based value in detail. The four forms of interaction-based value were also supported in the salespersons' interviews.

Customer representatives found it appreciable to hear *Valuable business information* from the salesperson and to be updated on the recent news in the field. When the salesperson shares information about their company's strategic decisions and latest activities from a viewpoint that interests the customer representative, the information is appreciated by the customer representative. In the words of a salesperson:

"A reactive partner is not interesting from the customer's perspective. A customer agrees to meet a partner who has something to tell. A lot of action needs to take place all the time." (Bob, SP)

Along the same lines, a customer representative acknowledged the following:

"Thank you for this; one always learns something new" (AR, Bess, CR, Meeting #7)

Customer representatives appreciated the opportunity to build a solid understanding of the salesperson and his performance during the sales meeting. *Salesperson-related value* is related to the character of the salesperson – for example, credibility, competencies, experience, and cognitive skills. Customer representatives appreciate when these kinds of characteristics can be found in a salesperson. Salespersons also commented on this aspect in their respective interviews:

"The customer will test our competence and our capability to challenge him." (Fred, SP)

"They will be interested in what I can do and what I am capable of." (Michael, SP)

Interaction during the sales meeting may also offer *Valuable insights* for the customer representatives. Customer representatives appreciated being challenged and getting new insights and options for enriching their thinking. Valuable insights are directly related to the customer representative's current interests, whereas valuable business information deals with news from the selling company and its activities. Valuable insights are connected to the customer's concerns and the salesperson's ability to offer triggers for the customer representative's thinking. A salesperson gave support for this form of interaction-based value as follows:

"A salesperson's job is to spar with the customer and to yield good stuff. It is an implicit wish of all the customers that they want to get ideas. The business has changed so that almost always when customers meet us, they have a kind of basic wish that the meeting will always generate something cool or

interesting. That is what makes customers satisfied. Customers want to have partners with whom they get the feeling that hey, this will bring out something new.” (Michael, SP)

And this was confirmed by the words of a customer representative:

“It really got me thinking how HR issues should be solved here; we could actually execute things in many different ways.” (Brian, CR)

The customer representatives’ interview answers were rich in describing *Interaction-related value*. Customer representatives described several interaction-related observations they had made during the meeting as gains. These observations include, for example, business-wise questions posed by the salesperson, similar perspectives, and passion regarding HR issues and similar styles of thinking. A positive atmosphere, easiness of talking, equality, and openness were also brought up by the customer representatives as feelings that they considered as gains for them. In the words of a salesperson:

“Well, you know that when the meeting is a pleasant one, you gain from it yourself.” (Brian, SP)

All the four forms of interaction-based value – Valuable business information, Salesperson-related value, Valuable insights, and Interaction-related value – appear to be firmly grounded in the actual minutes of the sales meeting. The customer representatives’ temporal focus on gains is directed towards the specific sales meeting and its appreciation as an individual event.

Next, I will compare the gains for the salespersons and the gains for the customer representatives and discuss how the interviewees assessed each other’s gains.

5.1.3 *Comparing the perspectives on interaction-based value*

In this chapter, I will first directly compare the similarities and differences between the salespersons’ and customer representatives’ appreciations in relation to the sales meetings. Second, I will compare the salespersons’ and the customer representatives’ assessments of each other’s gains. The comparison will help to articulate even more clearly the similarities and differences between the salespersons’ and customer representatives’ perspectives.

Both the salespersons’ and customer representatives’ gains were categorized into four forms of interaction-based value. Two of the forms were found in both groups: Valuable business-related information and Interaction-related value. Both groups also pointed to two forms of interaction-based value that the other group did not refer to. Salespersons appreciated various gains that

were related to the salestask. Furthermore, elements that supported the selling process were appreciated by salespersons. On their behalf, customer representatives appreciated building a better understanding of the salesperson. In addition, interaction during the sales meeting offered food for thought for the customer representatives. All the forms of interaction-based value are summarized in Figure 10.

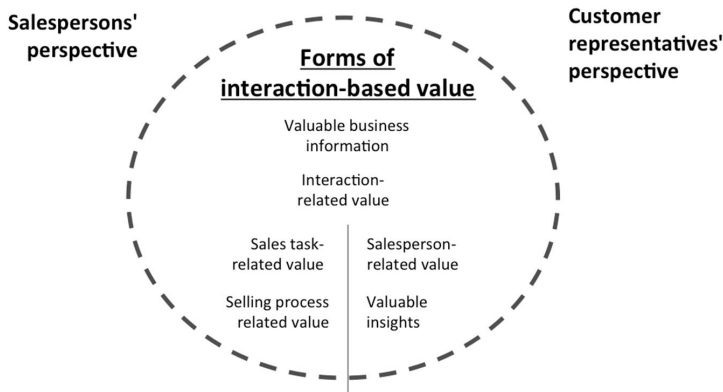


Figure 10 Forms of interaction-based value.

To sum up the differing value forms, customer representatives considered it important to get to know the salesperson, whereas salespersons did not mention it as important to know the customer representative in such depth (Figure 10). Salespersons appreciated gains that supported the salestask, whereas customer representatives did not point to gains that would have supported buying. Moreover, customer representatives found the meetings thought-provoking, whereas salespersons did not underscore this stimulating aspect as a gain.

Perhaps the most striking difference is related to the gains in relation to the selling process as appreciated by the salespersons. These gains attach the individual sales meeting to a selling process and represent a continuum of actions. However, customer representatives did not point to gains in relation to a buying process or any other process or activities outside the boundaries of the sales meeting. For the customer representatives, the sales meeting was a rather independent entity.

As a general notion, both groups considered it difficult to spontaneously express what they had expected to gain out of a meeting. Are sales meetings such routine activities that people attend them without much prior consideration? At least it would be natural for the salespersons to regard the possibility of making a sale as an expected gain. However, the salespersons

regarded a particular sales meeting as a milestone within a longer process. The salespersons did not describe the sales meeting as their main aim or an end in itself. The sales meeting was considered as a knot in the wider web of doing business in a highly competitive environment:

“I did not expect a concrete case to be found. However, there is this great piece of wisdom that says the time I get from the customer is away from competitors.” (Allison, SP)

“A majority of the meetings do not directly lead to anything.” (George, SP)

“You need to get a hold of the customer, leave some kind of a hook there. The customer might already have another proposal in his mailbox or perhaps a third party goes in next and closes the deal or the customer decides to execute the project themselves.” (Fred, SP)

“Selling may take a long time, but then the decision and the need may suddenly pop up. Somebody in the company wakes up and realizes that we need to have it right now” (AR, Violet, CR, Meeting #2)

I also wrote about this issue in the field notes:

“We [the salesperson and I] talked together about how it is often the case with professional selling that a customer meets with several competing service providers for a certain project. From those meetings the customer gets a lot of information and benchmarking knowledge on how to solve the challenge at hand. When the customer puts the contents from all the meetings together, he has the necessary tools to execute the project himself. However, it is often good in many projects that an external party is involved.” (FN #3, October 2011)

In general, both the salespersons and customer representatives found it difficult to assume or assess what the other person had expected to gain or had gained from the sales meeting. The salespersons assessed that the customer representatives' gains would be related to the following forms of interaction-based value: (1) valuable business information, (2) salesperson-related value, (3) valuable insights, and (4) business role-related value. When these assessments are compared to customer representatives' actual appreciations, the first three forms of interaction-based value are similar – but the fourth form is different. Instead of appreciating business role-related value that is related to the customer representatives' roles as business professionals, customer representatives appreciated interaction-related value.

Specifically, the salespersons assumed that the customer representatives appreciated business role-related value in the form of having the salesperson at hand as a listener. The salespersons assumed the customer representatives appreciated the opportunity to talk and to have someone who is there to listen, especially when the customer representative holds an executive position. The salespersons viewed an executive-level customer representative to be somewhat lonely in his organization. The salespersons considered themselves capable of alleviating the customer representative's potentially isolated situation, although the customer representatives did not point to this aspect as a gain:

"A top-level manager has a lot to tell if there is someone who listens. They only have a few persons to ventilate their thoughts with. A manager always gives so much to everyone else, and then these meetings are the kind of situations where someone else gives them the time and attention or is able to reflect with the person for a moment. This is something that the manager is not necessarily able to do in the operative work." (Mary, SP)

"Top managers are lonely. They are looking for someone who listens. Being a salesperson is a bit like being a therapist. Perhaps nobody else in the firm realizes what the moments of joy and sorrow are really about." (Fred, SP)

The customer representatives felt that the salespersons focused on three forms of interaction-based value: (1) valuable business information, (2) sales-task-related value, and (3) selling process-related value. The customer representatives were in line with all these forms of interaction-based value; however, they omitted one form that was appreciated by the salespersons: interaction-related value. In a similar vein, the salespersons did not discuss the customer representatives appreciating interaction-related value. In other words, both parties appreciate interaction-related value but do not assume that the other party does as well. Next, I will turn to an analysis of the application of interaction-based value and the levels and contexts for its application.

5.2 Value application processes, levels, and contexts

During the research interviews, I first asked about the interviewees' gains in relation to a sales meeting. I also asked the interviewees more detailed questions about the application of those gains, in terms of interaction-based value. The logic behind this question is based on the pragmatist notion of symbolic interactionism. Various objects – such as value – allow individuals

to guide their actions in various ways (cf. Blumer 1969). Moreover, an individual may imagine a line of action he intends to take toward an object (e.g. interaction-based value) and define the object based on this intended line of action (Charon 2010; Rock 1979). I aimed to understand how salespersons and customer representatives chose to guide their actions on the basis of interaction-based value; how did they act upon interaction-based value? I termed these activities value application processes. Value application processes are based on interaction-based value (basic categories); therefore, the value application processes serve as conceptual categories.

Value application is a process that captures how the person guides his actions and acts upon interaction-based value. Value application as a process is attached to interaction-based value. Starting from the beginning, first, interaction-based value emerges in relation to interpersonal interaction; second, interaction-based value is appreciated by individuals; and third, the same individuals – who have appreciated interaction-based value – act upon it. Therefore, the processes of emergence, appreciation, and application form an overall process that is attached to interaction-based value in relation to a face-to-face sales meeting. I now turn to analyzing and discussing value application processes and their levels and contexts in detail. I start from the salespersons' perspective.

5.2.1 Value application processes and salespersons

During the research interviews, I first asked the interviewees the question: “What did you gain from the meeting?” The answers were composed of various forms of interaction-based value. In relation to every answer, I asked the interviewees subsequent questions, such as: “What makes you mention that gain? / Why is that gain important to you? / Is something possible now that you have appointed the gain? / Are you doing something with the gains?” These questions attached interaction-based value to the ways in which the salespersons acted upon interaction-based value. The salespersons' answers served as descriptions of value application processes.

On the basis of the salespersons' interviews, I constructed 10 value application processes as conceptual categories. In addition, the interaction-based value that has first emerged and has then been appreciated moves through the value application processes to particular levels and contexts. The identified value application levels and contexts also stand for conceptual categories (Table 11).

Table 11 Salespersons' perspective: illustrative interview examples of value application processes and the levels and contexts for value application.

Illustrative interview examples	Value application processes	Actual/potential level of value application	Embedded context for value application
"I gain when I notice that the customer gains." (Allison, SP) "My expectations are fulfilled only if we are truly able to help the customer." (Fred, SP) "My job is about helping people." (George, SP)	Giving	Personal (Actual)	SP as an individual
"This brings about an overall belief in myself and the way I do things. I do not see any obstacles to succeeding in even more demanding situations." (Fred, SP) "I sleep better at night." (William, SP) "I gained energy from the customer." (Allison, SP) "When you are left with a good feeling, it motivates you to carry on with things." (George, SP)	Wellbeing		
"I am eager to tell the customer about our newest services." (Bob, SP) "I want to give a good image of our company." (Fred, SP) "I want to keep the customer updated about our good things." (Allison, SP)	Impressing		SP in his business role
"The solution you propose does not work if your understanding of the current state of things is out of line." (Fred, SP) "One needs to understand the [customer's] context into which I then tell our story." (Bob, SP)	Making sense		
"It enables my own growth and development." (Allison, SP) "My own understanding of the field is constantly updated." (Susan, SP) "I can develop my own selling activities and enhance my professionalism." (George, SP)	Developing professionally		
"Finding a view on how to operate together." (Susan, SP) "If you have not constructed a mutual map, you talk about things that do not meet or match. With a mutual map and understanding, you can be more efficient with exchanging ideas with the customer and also executing the solution." (Michael, SP)	Finding		Relational (Potential)
"This is a good basis for further cooperation." (James, SP) "This opened up the opportunity to carry on with the discussions." (Paul, SP)	Progressing together		
"Achieving a win-win feeling." (William, SP) "It builds up trust." (James, SP)	Supporting		Interpersonal
"These issues will affect the way our own strategy is formed." (Susan, SP) "This is a chance to develop our company's offerings synchronized with the needs of customers and in comparison to competition." (Allison, SP)	Strengthening the business	Corporate (Potential)	Business development
"The number of potential customers increases. The number of regular customers may also rise." (William, SP)	Strengthening the customer base		Core of business

On the basis of the forms of interaction-based value – Valuable business information, Interaction-related value, Salestask-related value, and Selling process related value – salespersons acted upon them through value application processes (Table 11). The value application processes occur at particular levels. The levels of value application processes represent settings for the application of interaction-based value and refer to individuals and groups of individuals. There are three value application levels: individual, relational, and corporate. *Individual level* refers to the salesperson himself, the *relational level* incorporates both the salesperson and the customer representative and the *corporate level* involves the selling company.

Moreover, the value application levels can be either actual or potential. *Actual levels* are known 'for sure' as they refer to the interviewed salespersons themselves. In comparison, a *potential level* refers to a person other than the interviewed salesperson or to an aggregate of people (a company). Potential levels are only assumed to exist as levels for value application. The one assuming is the interviewed salesperson. For example, the relational level of value application is a potential level because it involves both the salesperson and the customer representative. Although the salesperson appreciates and applies interaction-based value at this level, he does not know whether the customer representative appreciates or applies interaction-based value in a similar fashion.

In addition, each of the three value application levels contains two embedded contexts for value application processes. *The salesperson as an individual* and *the salesperson in his business role* are the embedded contexts at the individual level. The relational level involves *inter-firm cooperation* and *interpersonal* embedded contexts for the application of value. The corporate embedded contexts for value application processes involve *the core of business* and *business development*.

Value application processes are based on the descriptions salespersons offered during the research interviews (see Table 11). Giving and Wellbeing are applied at the personal level and, more precisely, in the embedded context of the salesperson as an individual. The value application processes of Impressing, Making sense and Developing personally also occur at the personal level and in the embedded context of the salesperson in his business role. Finding and Progressing together are applied at the relational level and in the inter-firm cooperation embedded context. Supporting is also applied at the relational level but in the interpersonal context. The value application process of Strengthening the business occurs at the corporate level and, more precisely, in the context of business development. Strengthening the customer base is also applied at the corporate level but in the context of core of business.

I will next discuss the value application processes from the salespersons' perspectives in more detail as well as the levels and contexts for value application processes. I will provide interview extracts from the salespersons' interviews to further characterize the value application processes. I only provide a few supporting interview extracts from the customer representatives' interviews. The lack of this perspective is due to the fact that during the research interviews, the customer representatives found it rather demanding and difficult to assess how salespersons might act upon interaction-based value.

In regard to the value application process of *Giving*, salespersons underscored the true essence or purpose of being a salesperson with this process. The value application process characterizes the salesperson as someone who finds contentment in helping others. Salespersons appreciate Giving as such. Thus, the value application process carries an altruistic connotation. Giving is applied at the personal level and in the embedded context of the salesperson as an individual.

When the salesperson is denied the opportunity of giving, it may cause frustration:

"I really wanted to help the customer. He had a clear need, and we were able to help him. However, the customer did not make a purchase decision, or more precisely he did not make any decision. The thing just faded away. I really thought that we had the means to create value for him. I was frustrated because the offering would have matched perfectly to the customer's need. I was disappointed." (Validating interview #3, SP)

Wellbeing emerged as a very strong value application process amongst the salespersons. For salespersons, sales meetings were energizing catapults and sources for believing in one's abilities.

"Positive experiences enhance wellbeing." (Susan, SP)

"You can do at least the same in the future." (Fred, SP)

"It is nice to plan or to move to something else after a good meeting. A good meeting affects how motivated I am." (Susan, SP)

The value application process of *Wellbeing* takes place at the personal level and affects the salesperson as an individual. Sales meetings enhance the salesperson's spirits and motivate the salesperson to do his best.

The value application process of *Impressing* concerns the salesperson's ability to impress the customer representative. When salespersons succeed in the value application process of *Impressing*, they build momentum for their

sales message and impress the customer representative with interesting news from the selling company. When a salesperson looks for ways to enter buying companies, the salesperson needs to be able to articulate his company's unique offering – including the salesperson himself – in an impressing manner. As expressed by a customer representative:

"First of all, a salesperson needs to sell himself to another person." (Kate, CR)

Impressing occurs at the personal level. More precisely, Impressing is related to the salesperson performing his business role. Salespersons find it professionally uplifting to be able to succeed in impressing the customer representative.

A salesperson hears a lot of information during a sales meeting. The salesperson needs to combine all the bits of information together and use the information in a productive manner. When salespersons are engaged with the value application process of *Making sense*, they contemplate and deliberate the information they have heard:

"New and important areas of selling potential emerged during our discussion." (James, SP)

"I understood what kind of holes there are which need to be filled." (George, SP)

When a salesperson is able to make sense, he truly understands the customer representative's and the buying company's processes and challenges. This value application process takes place at the personal level and in the context of the salesperson in his business role.

Developing professionally refers to the salesperson making progress in his profession and career. A sales meeting is a source for reflection and competence development:

"A sales meeting provides an opportunity to reflect my own doings." (Allison, SP)

"...how could I improve my way of being a salesperson." (James, SP)

Sales meetings offer inputs for the salesperson's professional development and strengthen the salesperson's knowledge base. This value application process occurs at the personal level in the context of the salesperson in his business role.

The value application process of *Finding* occurs during the sales meeting and involves the salesperson and the customer representative. This value application process culminates as the parties find a mutual and shared view of

the buying company's opportunities and challenges. As expressed by a customer representative:

"We are on the same page now" (AR, Violet, CR, Meeting #2)

Finding guarantees for both parties that they have reached a similar understanding of the issue at hand. In other words, they have both reached a matching perspective together. Finding is applied at the relational level and in the context of inter-firm cooperation.

The value application process of *Progressing together* is about exploring the situation, discussing various scenarios and possibilities, and moving forward in time. Through Progressing together, the salesperson and the customer representative reach a new level in their interaction that may ensure future interaction.

"Ensuring there is a mutual will to make progress together."
(George, SP)

Progressing together supports the continuation of the selling process and is applied at the relational level – more precisely, at the inter-firm cooperation context.

The value application process of *Supporting* is strongly related to the time of the sales meeting. Through Supporting, the salesperson and the customer representative create a smooth and pleasant interaction. In other words, the ongoing interaction is facilitated by both parties. As a result:

"There is no need to play any games and there is less room for misunderstandings" (William, SP)

Supporting may enable the salesperson and the customer representative to establish an emotional bond between them already during the sales meeting. Supporting is applied at the relational level and in the interpersonal context.

Finally, the value application processes of Strengthening the business and Strengthening the customer base involve the corporate level. *Strengthening the business* involves a salesperson who shares the insights he has gained during the sales meeting with other people in the selling company. Sales meetings provide, for example, grounds for benchmarking between businesses that in turn enable the selling company to strengthen its business.

"...whether companies in the selling company's target market are talking about the same issues that the selling company is promoting." (Violet, CR)

The selling company receives information from the market via the salesperson. As a result, product and service development as well as strategy formulation may be improved. Strengthening the business is applied at the corporate level and in the context of business development.

Strengthening the customer base is a value application process that supports the construction of a solid clientele and secures a steady turnover for the selling company.

"I gained one potential customer." (Rick, SP)

"I was considered as a potential partner." (William, SP)

"It guarantees turnover for our company." (James, SP)

Paying customers are the lifeline of any company. Strengthening the customer base is applied at the corporate level and in the specific context of the core of business.

As a general notion, there were no direct links between a certain interaction-based value and a certain value application process. Salespersons usually referred to several gains or were loose in their descriptions when they described the importance of a gain they had appointed or the basis for the actions they were planning to take. Next I turn to analyzing the value application processes from the customer representatives' viewpoint.

5.2.2 *Value application processes and customer representatives*

Customer representatives addressed four forms of interaction-based value in the research interviews. The forms as basic categories included Valuable business information, Interaction-related value, Salesperson-related value, and Valuable insights. These forms of interaction-based value offered starting points for the application of value. The customer representatives' answers to questions like "What makes you mention that? / Why is it important to you? / Is something new possible now?" provided descriptions for the value application processes.

The application of interaction-based value takes place after the emergence and appreciation of interaction-based value. Also, customer representatives appointed particular levels and contexts (conceptual categories) for the application of interaction-based value. Three levels of value application were identified: *personal*, *relational*, and *corporate*. The personal level incorporates two embedded contexts for the application of value: *customer representative as an individual* and *customer representative in his business role*. The relational level contains one embedded context, namely the *interpersonal context*. The corporate level involves the contexts of *business development* and *business model*. Based on the interview answers, I constructed seven value application processes as conceptual categories together with levels of and contexts for value application (Table 12).

Table 12 Customer representatives' perspective: illustrative interview examples of value application processes and their levels and contexts.

Illustrative interview examples	Value application process	Actual/Potential levels of value application	Contexts for value application
"I feel relieved." (Melissa, CR) "It supports the rightness of your own thinking." (Violet, CR)	Wellbeing	<i>Personal (Actual)</i>	<i>CR as an individual</i>
"It is reassuring that the salesperson genuinely comprehends what you are saying." (Melissa, CR) "The selling company follows trends in the market." (Bess, CR)	Becoming convinced		<i>CR in his business role</i>
"... the meaning of a good trainer is emphasized in these situations; you cannot bring just anybody up there". (Ellen, CR) "Our audience is very demanding. The seminar has to be a bingo!" (Sabine, CR) "It is of crucial importance that we find the right trainers." (Susan, CR)	Becoming able to impress		
"It helps me in my work to understand the business and the playground; it is expected of me to know these things." (Violet, CR) "I had high expectations. They have a lot of competence in our field. If they perform well, that will also make me to aim higher, to really work for it" (Robin, CR) "It boosted my thinking." (Brian, CR)	Developing professionally		
"It produces a trusting atmosphere" (Violet, CR) "It deepens trust." (Bess, CR)	Supporting	<i>Relational (Potential)</i>	<i>Interpersonal</i>
"The discussion brought about new initiatives for our personnel development." (Christopher, CR) "He suggested a totally new idea to be included in our training program." (Sabine, CR)	Strengthening the business	<i>Corporate (Potential)</i>	<i>Business development</i>
"Situations change quickly. You need to have an understanding of what your partner network can offer." (Violet, CR) "It is important to look for new potential service providers to be included in our network and to develop and update the network." (Ellen, CR)	Strengthening the partner network		<i>Business model</i>

Seven value application processes describe how customer representatives act upon interaction-based value after its emergence and appreciation (Table 12). Wellbeing is the only value application process that is related to the personal level of the customer representative as an individual. The other three value application processes at the personal level – Becoming convinced, Becoming able to impress, and Developing professionally – are related to the customer representative in his business role. The value application process of Supporting takes place at the relational level and in the interpersonal context. Strengthening the business and Strengthening the partner network are applied at the corporate level. The latter occurs in the context of the business model and the former in the context of business development.

I will next discuss the value application processes in more detail as well as the levels of and contexts for value application. I will also offer supporting interview extracts from the salespersons' interviews. The salespersons – unlike the customer representatives – were able and willing to consider the customer representative's perspective on acting upon interaction-based value.

Sales meetings offered inputs for enhancing the customer representative's wellbeing. The value application process of *Wellbeing* is constructed of supportive thoughts and feelings. Salespersons gave examples of these situations as well:

"I told him [the customer representative] that he has done many things very well." (James, SP)

Interaction in a sales meeting may offer soothing thoughts for one's mind – a moment to reflect on things and to feel content. The value application process of *Wellbeing* occurs at the personal level and in the context of a customer representative as an individual.

Customer representatives described the value application process of *Becoming convinced* as being reassured by the salesperson as well as the selling company. Becoming convinced meant that customer representatives were able to trust that they were making well-informed choices. These choices were related to choosing the right partner and trusting that mutual business will progress smoothly. In the words of salespersons:

"He can be certain that the seller is a safe choice." (William, SP)

"He can be certain that the partner is the right choice for them." (Michael, SP)

Customer representatives Became convinced by learning more about the salesperson as an individual and in his business role. The customer representatives were interested in the salesperson's competence areas and how well the salesperson would fit or match the expectations and needs of the buying company. The value application process of *Becoming convinced* occurred at the personal level and in the context of the customer representative in his business role.

It seemed that customer representatives considered the salesperson as more crucial or superior in comparison to the actual company the salesperson happened to represent during the sales meeting. The salesperson is a physical embodiment and concrete proof of capability for the customer representative in comparison to the more abstract and distant selling company. The customer representative appreciates getting convinced by the salesperson. For example, according to the customer representatives' opinions, expertise generates

authority and credibility when the salesperson is facing an audience as a trainer:

"The trainer cannot go there and teach them. They need to feel that they figured this out themselves and the trainer only facilitated." (AR, Ellen, CR, Meeting #4)

A common pattern in the customer representatives' answers appeared in the way they combined the sales meeting with the expectations of their own internal customers or external customers. Customer representatives wanted to be able to meet the needs of their own internal or external customers; they wanted to *become able to impress* others. Customer representatives were hoping that the sales meeting would help them to succeed in their work and build a solid argument base for their business cases in the eyes of their own organization:

"It is important to sell the new understanding from one organizational level to the next and to move from planning to execution. If the upper organizational level does not acknowledge the benefits of doing this, the thing does not fly." (AR, Melissa, CR, Meeting #5)

The value application process of *Becoming able to impress* occurs at the personal level and is attached to the customer representative in his business role. Salespersons also felt that customer representatives appreciate a salesperson who can boost the customer representative in making an impact:

"My job is about helping the customer representative to succeed in her position in the company in the best possible way." (Allison, SP)

"I help him to achieve his personal goals as a director." (Fred, SP)

The value application process of *Developing professionally* involves the customer representative in his business role and takes place at the personal level. The sales meeting offers gains for the customer representative that will enhance professionalism in his position:

"The customer representative can benchmark his ideas with the experiences I have had with other buying companies." (Michael, SP)

"He [the customer representative] had a chance to exchange thoughts on a neutral ground." (George, SP)

"You get peer support from the salesperson." (Kate, CR)

The emphasis on finding similarly minded peers and appreciating it was also expressed during the audio-recorded sales meetings:

"I totally agree with you." (AR, Bess, CR, Meeting #7)

All those occupying a customer representative's role in the validating interviews (#1, #2, #4, and #5) described the poor sales meetings as good learning cases for their professional development. The unsuccessful meeting supported the customer representative's professional development in becoming a more experienced buyer. The customer representative understood from a new perspective what it actually means to act as a professional buyer meeting a salesperson. All interviewees also discussed how they could actually orient themselves better for meetings in the future and to prepare at least a mental agenda for any meeting.

The value application process of *Supporting* was also described by customer representatives. Supporting is about a good mutual interaction – affected by both parties – that enables a more successful interaction during the ongoing sales meeting. When the atmosphere during a sales meeting is open, no one needs to be afraid to speak up:

"If the meeting is intimidating, you do not want to suggest anything. A meeting with a good spirit gives room for ideas and novel thoughts which one dares to express aloud." (Melissa, CR)

Supporting as a value application process occurs at the relational level and occupies the interpersonal context. The validating interviews (#1, #2, #4, and #5) offered a different kind of perspective to the value application process of Supporting. When the salesperson was not performing well during the meeting, the customer representatives considered various means to help and encourage the salesperson in order to support the interaction. The customer representatives also deliberated on the ways in which a professional buyer could impact the course of the meeting and perhaps be more direct with a salesperson who does not, for example, stick to the topic.

The value application process of *Strengthening the business* occurs at the corporate level. In customer representatives' views, the sales meeting offered alternatives and options that would be good for developing their business. The perspective was also confirmed by salespersons:

"It will help to improve the company's business." (George, SP)

Sales meetings can be regarded as sources for hearing new ideas that can even be executed by the buying company without the selling company's assistance. Strengthening the business is applied in the context of business development.

Customer representatives considered it valuable to increase the number of potential service providers in their network. Customer representatives wanted to be proactively prepared to face the day when the need for using partners would arise and then, and not until then, to be able to rely on their versatile network, a pool of competent service providers. The customer representatives wanted to prepare themselves for various scenarios by *Strengthening their partner network*. Also, salespersons regarded the customer representatives to be most keen on finding the best possible business partners for their company:

"The buying company wants to operate with the best players in the market. That is when the company gets the most out of cooperation." (Allison, SP)

"The customer representative's ultimate goal is to get the best partner." (Michael, SP)

"The key partners are in a crucial position when it comes to the buying company's success." (William, SP)

Buying companies rely on an extensive partner network in doing business. This value application process takes place at the corporate level and in the context of a business model.

I now turn to comparing the value application processes and their levels and contexts appointed by salespersons and customer representatives.

5.2.3 Comparing value application processes, levels and contexts

Altogether, 13 various value application processes as conceptual categories were constructed on the basis of the gathered data. All the value application processes are based on interaction-based value that first emerged, was then appreciated, and finally applied by an individual. Four similar kind of value application processes were appointed by both the salespersons and customer representatives. In addition, salespersons described six exclusive value application processes, and customer representatives appointed three. The following comparison across value application processes accentuates the differences between salespersons' and customer representatives' views. All value application processes and their application levels and contexts are summarized in Table 13.

Table 13 Comparing value application processes and their application levels and contexts from salespersons' and customer representatives' perspectives.

SALESPERSON		CUSTOMER REPRESENTATIVE		
	VALUE APPLICATION PROCESSES			
<i>Value application contexts</i>	Exclusive	Similar	Exclusive	<i>Value application contexts</i>
Personal level:				
<i>SP as an individual</i>	Wellbeing			<i>CR as an individual</i>
	Giving			
<i>SP in his business role</i>	Developing professionally			<i>CR in his business role</i>
	Impressing		Becoming able to impress	
	Making sense		Becoming convinced	
Relational level:				
<i>Interpersonal</i>	Supporting			<i>Interpersonal</i>
<i>Inter-firm cooperation</i>	Progressing together			
	Finding			
Corporate level:				
<i>Business development</i>	Strengthening the business			<i>Business development</i>
<i>Core of business</i>	Strengthening the customer base		Strengthening the partner network	<i>Business model</i>

Salespersons and customer representatives described four similar value application processes: Wellbeing, Developing professionally, Supporting, and Strengthening the business (Table 13). In more detail, both salespersons and customer representatives applied interaction-based value in a way that positively influenced their wellbeing as individuals. They also applied interaction-based value in a manner that further enhanced their skills in their business roles. Moreover, interaction-based value eventually supported the salespersons' and customer representatives' mutual interaction during the sales meeting. Interaction-based value was applied in a manner that could help the respective companies to strengthen their businesses.

The value application processes are related to certain value application levels and contexts as conceptual categories (see Table 13). Both salespersons and customer representatives refer to similar types of value application levels: personal, relational, and corporate. At the personal level, interaction-based

value is applied in two similar embedded contexts: salesperson/customer representative as an individual and salesperson/customer representative in their business roles. The relational level involves one similar context, the interpersonal context for the application of value. In addition, the relational level also involves the inter-firm cooperation context for the salespersons. Strengthening the business is similarly applied at the corporate level in the business development context. The corporate level also includes one more embedded context for both parties. Salespersons describe Strengthening the customer base in the embedded context of core of business, whereas customer representatives appoint Strengthening the partner network in the embedded context of their business model. This implies to some extent that interaction-based value is applied in customer and partner networks as well.

Moreover, some of the value application processes (e.g. Giving, Impressing, Supporting) seem to actualize even during the sales meeting. There are other value application processes that seem to be rather future-orientated and will actualize at a later stage, after the sales meeting (e.g. Becoming able to impress, Strengthening the business).

An interesting perspective distinguishing the salespersons and the customer representatives is the value application process of Giving. This altruistic process illustrates the salespersons as givers who enjoy being able to help customer representatives. In addition, salespersons appointed the chance of Making a good impression of their company and of themselves to the customer representative. The value application process of Making sense is related to the salesperson's need to gain an in-depth understanding of the customer's situation for making his next contribution. Both Progressing together and Finding are related to the interaction between the salesperson and the customer representative; Progressing paves the way to future business opportunities, and Finding ensures a mutual understanding of things. The value application process of Strengthening the customer base refers to safeguarding the business with steady turnover and an ample number of customers.

On their behalf, the customer representatives' value application processes differed from those of the salespersons in three particular ways. First, the customer representatives appointed Becoming able to impress their internal and external customers. Second, the customer representatives found it important to become convinced of the salesperson's abilities and of the selling company's credibility. Third, the customer representatives regarded the role of their partner network as crucial and therefore appreciated reinforcements to it.

To sum up, the differences in value application processes illustrated many interesting aspects. At the personal level, customer representatives did not find the sales meetings as contexts for their altruistic goals; they did not mention appreciating the ability to provide enlightening ideas for the salespersons. The

customer representatives did not appoint impressing the salesperson with the buying company's latest news. Neither did they describe value application processes in relation to understanding in-depth the challenge at hand. On their behalf, salespersons did not appoint becoming able to impress their superiors on the basis of interaction-based value. Nor did the salespersons refer to the need for becoming convinced that the buying company is a good choice business-wise for the selling company. The salespersons are dealing with convincing and impressing, whereas the customer representatives are waiting to be convinced and impressed.

At the relational level, the customer representatives did not stress working together as a genuine dyad. Nor did the customer representatives emphasize the value application process related to finding a mutual map. From the salespersons' perspectives, the salesperson and the customer representative work together in a genuinely dyadic fashion during the sales meeting. This kind of mutual cooperation is appreciated by the salespersons:

"I debate ideas together with the customer." (Allison, SP)

"We found new things together with the customer." (George, SP)

"We understood the situation together." (Michael, SP)

However, the customer representatives were not expecting to gain from working together as such; instead, they emphasized elements that are 'handed over' to them, such as valuable insights. The salespersons seem to expect to gain from *doing things together*, whereas the customer representatives find it valuable just *to receive* without considering the potential mutual interaction related to receiving. Overall, salespersons underscore mutual cooperation during the sales meeting, whereas customer representatives expect things to be more or less given to them.

Finally, at the corporate level, the salespersons did not underscore strengthening the selling company's partner network. On their behalf, the customer representatives did not refer to strengthening the buying company's customer base. The salespersons naturally prefer having the buying companies as paying customers instead of business partners. However, the customer representative's did not refer to the buying company's end customers in relation to value application processes. As a matter of fact, the customer representatives referred to their internal customers (board of directors, personnel) in relation to applying interaction-based value.

I now turn to analyzing the salespersons' and customer representatives' reciprocal assessments of each other's gains. The salespersons assessed that the customer representatives would appoint three value application processes: Wellbeing, Becoming convinced, and Strengthening the business. All these suggested value application processes were also indicated by the customer

representatives. However, the salespersons did not underscore Becoming able to impress, Developing professionally, or Strengthening the partner network as value application processes for the customer representatives. When the salesperson leaves the customer's premises, the customer representative essentially turns into a salesperson. Then it is time for the customer representative as the salesperson to convince and impress his (internal) customers. In other words, the original salesperson actually helps the customer representative to sell. In addition, sales meetings offer experience and insights for the customer representative's professional development that the salespersons do not always consider. Lastly, the salespersons do not seem to recognize the tendency of the buying companies to build partner networks as a model for doing business. There is a new step for the salesperson to take: in between booking and conducting successful meetings and signing contracts, the selling company needs to be deemed worthy of becoming part of the buying company's partner network.

On their behalf, the customer representatives assessed that salespersons would refer to two value application processes: Impressing and Making money. Impressing was also appointed by the salespersons as a value application process.

The customer representatives also assessed that the salespersons would eventually indicate financial gains as a value application process (Making money), although monetary considerations were not emphasized by the salespersons.

"He needs clients and projects, it is his livelihood." (Melissa, CR)

The suggested value application process of Making money is not included, for example, in Table 13. The combination of value application processes in Table 13 is a collection of processes that have been indicated as value application processes by the appreciators themselves. As the suggested process of Making money was not appointed nor appreciated by the salespersons themselves, the process is not included in the 'actual' value application processes. However, the suggested process reflects the customer representatives' attitudes toward the salespersons. The salespersons are regarded as business professionals who are ultimately after money.

This chapter has aimed to answer the three research questions of the study: what is the nature of interaction-based value, how do individuals apply interaction-based value, and what are the levels and contexts for the application of interaction-based value in the context of business-to-business sales meetings? First, the nature of interaction-based value has been identified as six forms of interaction-based value. Second, value application processes manifest the application of interaction-based value. Altogether, 17 value application

processes have been constructed on the basis of the data. Four of the processes are common to both parties. In addition, the salespersons refer to nine and the customer representatives to three value application processes. Third, the levels of value application involve the personal, relational, and corporate levels. Each of the levels involves two embedded contexts for value application: salesperson/customer representative as an individual/in his business role, interpersonal, inter-firm cooperation, developing business, core of business, and business model. Interaction-based value emerges on the basis of interpersonal interaction, is appreciated by individuals, and is then applied – by those who appreciate it – in the named three levels and two specific contexts at each level.

The answers to these three research questions form the core for constructing a substantive grounded theory on the appreciation and application of interaction-based value in business-to-business sales meetings from the viewpoint of individuals. In the next chapter, I turn to theorizing about interaction-based value and its application. Eventually, I will construct a theoretical rendering of the studied phenomenon in the form of a grounded theory (cf. Charmaz 2006).

6 CONSTRUCTING A GROUNDED THEORY ON INTERACTION-BASED VALUE

The aim of this study was to offer a substantive grounded theory on interaction-based value in the context of business-to-business sales meetings. The grounded theory offered in this study is grounded in the findings of the data. Interaction-based value, its emergence, appreciation, and application in certain levels and contexts forms the core of the theory. The processual nature of interaction-based value is one cornerstone of the constructed theory.

The construction of a grounded theory requires well-analyzed processes at a theoretical level if the study is to move beyond simply a descriptive one (Charmaz, 1990). When theorizing, the researcher analyzes the studied action from various perspectives and moves between empirical material, experience, and the emerging abstract understanding (Charmaz 2006). I apply a combined style to discuss the construction of the theory. First, I present the resulting grounded theory as "a well-codified set of propositions" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 31) Second, I incorporate the empirically-based results to relevant research streams and offer new theoretical concepts on the basis of the research results.

I begin the chapter by analyzing the findings of the study and considering their relationships to relevant sales and marketing studies. I move from interaction-based value to value application processes and eventually to defining the unfolding of value through particular value spaces. The chapter concludes with a grounded theory on interaction-based value in sales settings.

6.1 Appreciation and application of interaction-based value

After its emergence, interaction-based value is appreciated. Based on the data, six forms of interaction-based value were identified: Valuable business information, Salestask-related value, Salesperson-related value, Valuable insights, Selling process-related value, and Interaction-related value. These forms are further applied through 17 value application processes. The processes are related to particular value application levels and to embedded value application contexts within the levels (Figure 11).

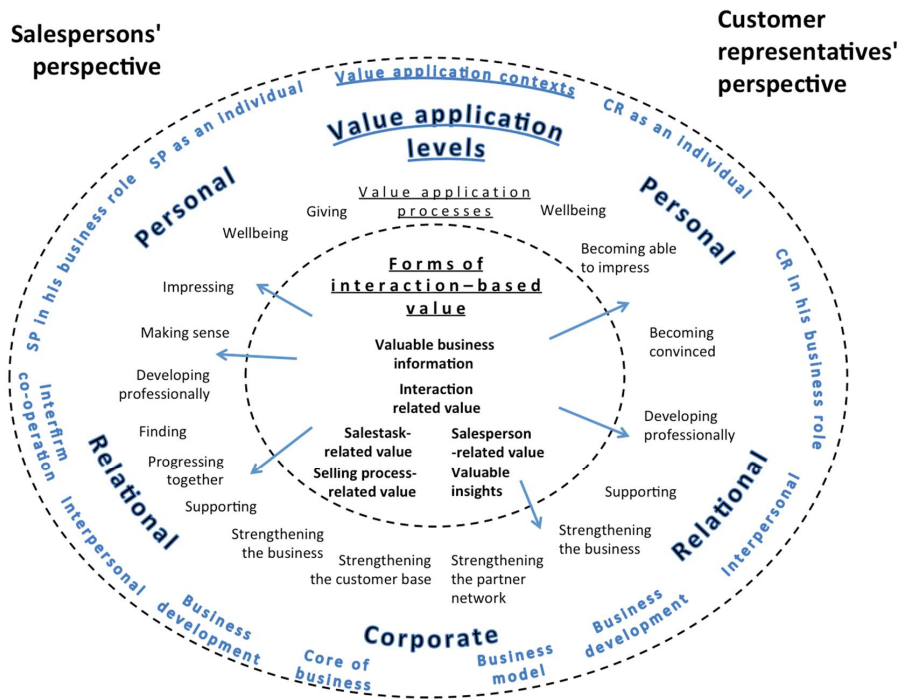


Figure 11 Forms of interaction-based value, value application processes, and value application levels and contexts.

Figure 11 summarizes in totality the nature of interaction-based value and subsequent value application processes. The left-hand side of Figure 11 is related to the salesperson and the right-hand side to the customer representative. The “-ing” forms in the names of value application processes underscore the dynamic nature of interaction-based value. Interaction-based value changes its form as individuals act upon it through value application processes. Therefore, interaction-based value can be characterized as dynamic. Interaction-based value can also be characterized as processual since it evolves through the processes of emergence, appreciation, and application. The processual aspect is illustrated with arrows in Figure 11. Eventually, interaction-based value is applied at particular value application levels and in embedded value application contexts.

Based on the data, the forms of interaction-based value can be regarded as an intertwined whole, a symbiosis. The symbiosis of the forms of interaction-based value offers a leveraging point for the individual. Hence, the application of interaction-based value is not a causal process linking a certain form of interaction-based value to a certain value application process (cf. Lindesmith, 1981). It is up to the individual to guide his actions based on the forms of

interaction-based value. Therefore, the arrows in Figure 11 do not lead from a certain form of interaction-based value to a certain value application process.

6.1.1 *The appreciation of interaction-based value*

Based on the findings of the study, sales meetings can be regarded as independent platforms for the emergence of interaction-based value. As a platform, the sales meeting offers time and space for interpersonal interaction between a salesperson and a customer representative as the "fundamental unit of interaction" (Tosi, 1966, 518). Overt and covert actions within and between the parties serve as the basis for the emergence of interaction-based value.

Six forms of interaction-based value were identified (see Figure 11). Valuable business information and Interaction-related value were appreciated by both the salespersons and the customer representatives. In addition, the salespersons appreciated Salestask-related value as well as Selling process-related value. On their behalf, the customer representatives appreciated Salesperson-related value and Valuable insights.

Valuable business information was identified as a form of interaction-based value for both the salesperson and the customer representative. Valuable business information is related to the characteristics of the selling or buying company. For the salespersons, valuable business information was related to the buying company's (for example) recent development, news from the field of business, and future plans. For the customer representatives, valuable business information was characterized by learning about the selling company's (for example) investments in competence development and the ways the selling company stays ahead of the competition. In a parallel fashion, company characteristics have been underscored as a value driver that may occur in the pre-transactional context of the selling process (Lapierre, 2000; Menon et al., 2005).

Interaction-based value refers to covert and unobservable feelings and emotions. Both the salespersons and customer representatives appreciate interaction with each other when it evokes feelings of equality, happiness, openness, respect, and interpersonal trust.

The salespersons appreciated value in relation to the sales task at hand. *Salestask-related value* serves the present goals of the salesperson in progressing with the sale. The value may be, for example, appreciation of receiving the customer's time and the opportunity to advance the selling agenda and hear about the customer's needs and challenges. Advancing the sale has been offered as one of the salesperson's expectations of a sales meeting (Williams et al., 1990).

The salespersons also appreciated *selling process-related value*. When salespersons observed, for example, interest from the customer representative's side and were given reference permissions and leads, the salespersons were able to continue selling on the basis of the ongoing sales meeting and to craft an offer and therefore continue the selling process.

The customer representatives appreciated the characteristics and style of the *salesperson* as a form of interaction-based value. The salesperson's competences and experience as well as the salesperson's credible image and customer-oriented attitude were appreciated by customer representatives. In a parallel fashion, Weitz (1981) offers the salesperson and his characteristics as an element affecting and explaining the success of interaction in a sales setting. Williams, Everett and Rogol (2009) have also argued that a majority of customers base their purchase decisions first and foremost on the salesperson rather than on any other criteria.

The customer representatives also appreciated gaining *valuable insights*. They appreciated the salesperson's efforts in offering new ideas and options. Customer representatives enjoyed interacting with a person who pushes their thinking to new terrains with thought-provoking ideas. The importance of providing insights has been underscored since "the biggest driver of B2B customer loyalty is the supplier's ability to deliver new insights" (Adamson, Dixon and Toman, 2012, 67).

After its emergence and appreciation, interaction-based value is acted upon through value application processes. Next, I turn to examining these processes and related value application contexts and levels.

6.1.2 *The application of interaction-based value*

The value application processes identified in this study resonate with the perspectives underscored in other sales studies. I will next incorporate the results of the study to related discussions in the field of sales studies. For analytical purposes, I have divided the value application processes into the following interrelated subgroups that are applied in particular value levels: Wellbeing and Giving at the personal level in the individual context; Impressing and Becoming convinced at the personal level in the context of the salesperson/customer representative; Becoming able to impress and Developing professionally at the personal level in the context of the salesperson/customer representative; Making sense, Finding and Progressing together at the relational level in the context of inter-firm cooperation; Supporting at the relational level in the interpersonal context; and Strengthening the business, Strengthening the customer base, and Strengthening the partner network

at the corporate level in the contexts of business development, core of business, and business model.

As a value application process, *Wellbeing* is appreciated by both the salespersons and customer representatives. Based on the results, the sales meeting is a basis for enhancing a person's wellbeing in the form of, for example, believing in oneself, sleeping better, gaining energy, and feeling relieved. After a sales meeting, the salesperson and the customer representative may feel energized and motivated to move forward to other tasks:

“At its best it leads to, when I leave the sales meeting with my colleague, we are both extremely excited, and if the customer representative says that he is eagerly waiting for our offering, then I go to the car with my colleague and we are so inspired that this is going to be a good case. If my spirits are really high, I might also tell my wife in the evening that there was a really good meeting today.” (Rick, SP)

Wellbeing in sales settings has been recently appointed in a similar fashion by Sujan (2011). He argues that good salespersons “make their customers happy” (Sujan, 2011, 421). He goes on to the extent of suggesting that, generally speaking, salespersons actually sell wellbeing.

The value application processes of Wellbeing and of Giving carry a resemblance to elements that intrinsically motivate⁸ salespersons. Intrinsically motivated salespersons find joy directly from the work they do (Weitz et al., 1986). Intrinsically motivated people work for intrinsically appealing rewards, such as pride, sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and enjoyment (Román and Iacobucci, 2010). In addition, opportunities for personal growth have been shown to be psychological incentives motivating salespersons (Walker et al., 1979).

Based on the results, the salespersons underscore the value application process of *Impressing*. Salespersons are eager to tell about themselves and their company's offerings and to provide a good overall image. Considered from the customer representatives' side, the value application process of *Becoming convinced* offers a match for *Impressing*. Customer representatives become convinced on the basis of learning more about the salesperson and the selling company and being able to make well-informed decisions. However, from the salesperson's perspective there is an important difference between *impressing* and *persuading*. *Impressing* may result in convincing the customer representative, but the customer representative may feel as though he is being pushed

⁸ A salesperson's motivation is defined as “the amount of effort the salesman desires to expend on each of the activities or tasks associated with his job” (Walker et al., 1979, 25–26).

against the wall if the salesperson appears too aggressive. Based on the data, customer representatives dislike pushy sales meetings and an aggressive selling style:

"When a salesperson persuasively sells his own product, I naturally become skeptical that this is the salesperson's talk once again." (Kate, CR)

Personal selling has long been considered as a persuasion effort. Personal selling has been defined as an "*interpersonal persuasion process*" (Wilson, 1977, 355) that is "*concerned with direct, person-to-person persuasive communication*" (Smith 1964, 493). In contrast to persuading, ideally salespersons "*interact with customers and do not act on them*" (Williams et al., 1990, 39).

Based on the results, the customer representatives also appreciate being offered new insights and becoming convinced that the salesperson and the selling company are trustworthy. When the customer representative is convinced, he can be certain that things are going to the right direction.

The customer representatives appreciate *Becoming able to impress* and *Developing professionally*. The customer representatives want to make good impressions when facing their internal customers. In addition, the customer representatives and salespersons acknowledge opportunities for professional growth in sales settings. Sales meetings offer opportunities to grow as an expert and specialist in one's field of expertise.

Customer representatives appreciate *Becoming able to impress*. During the sales meeting, the salesperson may help the customer representative to identify supporting arguments for a particular project. This will support the customer representative in seeming convincing when internally selling the project to the decision-makers in the buying company.

"I may help the customer representative to clarify his understanding of the need... As a result, it will also be easier for the company to make a positive buying decision." (Michael, SP)

As ironic as it may sound, the salesperson is actually helping the customer representative to become a salesperson toward the customer representative's internal customers. The salesperson has an impact on how successful the customer representative – turned salesperson – is in *Becoming able to impress* others in the company. Customer representatives continue the work of the salesperson: "there's no escaping the fact that in larger sales, a major part of the selling ... will be done by your internal supporters while you're not there" (Rackham 1988, 87).

The customer representatives appreciate *Developing professionally*. They are keen on growing as professionals in their field of business and leveraging

their thinking to new levels. The salesperson may adopt the role of “challenger” if he wants to enable the customer representative to develop professionally. The challengers literally challenge their customers to think creatively by sharing their professional views with the customers and by communicating new and innovative business ideas to their customers (Dixon and Adamson 2011). Taking on the role of challenger results in stimulating insights for both the salesperson and the customer representative, although the challenger first takes the risk of pushing the customer out of his comfort zone (Dixon and Adamson 2011).

In addition, the salespersons also appreciate *Developing professionally*. Based on the results, the salespersons appreciate being able to develop their sales activities in terms of selling skills and quantitative outcomes. Goal-orientation frames this notion from two perspectives (Sujan, Weitz and Kumar, 1994; see also Harris, Mowen and Brown, 2005). First, from the viewpoint of learning goals, based on sales meetings, the salesperson may improve his selling skills. Second, from the viewpoint of performance goals, the salesperson may demonstrate he is able to sell well with high sales volumes.

The value application processes of Making sense, Finding, and Progressing together were appointed only by the salespersons. *Making sense* refers to the salesperson’s ability to synthesize all the bits of information he has learned to understand the buying company’s situation in-depth. The process takes place at the personal level. *Finding* and *Progressing together* occur at the relational level. Salespersons appreciate working with the customer in discovering and constructing a solid conception of the challenge at hand. Moreover, mutual progress builds a continuum from the ongoing sales meeting to the next one.

These three value application processes resonate with the perspective of value-based selling. Particularly when selling professional services, pre-defined products – even in their updated forms – do not play a role. Instead, in value-based selling, the salesperson is first challenged to understand the customer’s processes and then to innovate changes to these processes (Kaario et al. 2004). The salesperson relies on the customer representative to engage in the processes of Making sense and Finding due to the often complex and organization-wide scope of the total sales effort. From the salesperson’s perspective, constructing an understanding and an offer demands inputs from both parties (Terho et al., 2012). Complex offers require time and effort from “two business equals working together to create value for the customer’s customer” (Rackham and DeVinentis 1999, 162).

On the basis of the results, both salespersons and customer representatives appreciate the value application process of *Supporting*. Supporting occurs during the sales meeting and facilitates the smooth flow of interpersonal interaction. Supporting is enabled by both parties as they both facilitate a pleasant

interaction and ensure the meeting progresses smoothly. Supporting was characterized as a win–win feeling, a trusting atmosphere, and the building of an emotional bond. In a similar fashion, rapport management (Campbell, Davis and Skinner, 2006), active empathetic interpersonal listening (Castleberry and Shepherd, 1993; Comer and Drollinger 1999), and high levels of attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness (Salomonson et al., 2012) have been suggested as requirements for the salesperson in facilitating a pleasant sales meeting.

Supporting the ongoing sales meeting demands perceptual skills from the salesperson's side. During the research interviews, a salesperson expressed the following viewpoint:

"I think this [the interview structure] was quite good. Of course it is more difficult for the interviewee when you need to think about things from another person's view, but then again that is the most important thing in a sales meeting. As a matter of fact, you are always thinking from the other person's perspective."
(Susan, SP)

When a salesperson is actively engaged with perspective-taking, he is better able to understand and find out what it is that customers appreciate in relation to the meeting (cf. Baumann and Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2013). In addition, in order to succeed in Supporting, salespersons are challenged to acknowledge the verbal and non-verbal cues of the customer representative (Boorom et al., 1998).

The value application processes of Strengthening the business, Strengthening the customer base, and Strengthening the partner network occur at the corporate level. These value application processes ultimately connect the interaction-based value from the level of the salesperson to the level of the company. Strengthening the business and Strengthening the customer base are examples of how information and insights from sales meetings benefit the selling company when the salesperson applies them at the corporate level.

Strengthening the business is applied in the embedded context of business development. In the words of a salesperson:

"Customers are fine service developers. You can always test ideas and prototypes with customers, although there would not be a chance for selling." (Allison, SP)

This perspective is linked to indirect-value functions identified by Möller and Törrönen (2003) in relation to industrial relationships. More specifically, the authors offer the innovation function as a form of innovating the selling company's offerings together with the customer. In addition, the scout function refers to learning information about the buying company and its market

position and the competitive environment through interacting with the customer (Möller and Törrönen, 2003). As salespersons are in a pivotal position in hearing crucial information from customers, they are challenged to synthesize information and to promote and champion the new ideas to the selling company (Evans and Miao 2011; Flaherty and Pappas, 2009).

Strengthening the customer base was also appreciated by salespersons. Sales meetings offered opportunities for increasing the number of potential customers in the customer base and securing business and sales volumes for the selling company. In a parallel fashion, Möller and Törrönen (2003) offer the safeguarding function as a direct-value function in relation to business-to-business relationships. Specifically, the safeguarding function guarantees ongoing business and revenues for the selling company in the form of contractual arrangements (Möller and Törrönen, 2003).

Customer representatives underscored their appreciation of *Strengthening the partner network*. Customer representatives were looking for qualified new partners to be potentially included in their network as they rely on their partner networks and use outsourcing in selected situations. Buying companies are becoming more selective regarding the vendors they choose to do business with (Adamson et al., 2012; Tuli et al., 2007) and, as a result, selling companies are now competing to gain key supplier status amongst all members in the partner network (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006).

The value application processes are related to particular levels and contexts. Next I approach the spaces, levels, and contexts in relation to value unfolding processes on the basis of the results.

6.2 The space for the unfolding of interaction-based value

Interaction-based value progresses through the processes of value emergence, appreciation, and application. The evolvement of interaction-based value through these processes makes interaction-based value subjectively meaningful for interacting individuals. Therefore, all the three subsequent processes are necessary for interaction-based value to become meaningful for the individuals in the sales context. I term the overarching process that incorporates the processes of emergence, appreciation, and application as the unfolding of interaction-based value. The unfolding of interaction-based value stands for a theoretical category.

The unfolding of interaction-based value is an overarching process. It comprises the subsequent processes of value emergence, value appreciation, and value application. Each of the processes occupies a certain space – in other words, the unfolding of value evolves through these particular spaces.

The value space defines the sphere of the dyadic setting where value unfolding processes occur. The value space may be shared or exclusive vis-à-vis the members of the interaction. Value space forms another theoretical category of the proposed grounded theory and comprises either shared or exclusive value levels and contexts.

The emergence of value demands the participation of at least two individuals. The interacting individuals share the same time and place during the sales meeting, which constitutes the platform for the emergence of value. Thus, the value space for value emergence is *shared* between the parties in the dyadic setting. The value level is relational as it involves both members of the sales meeting.

On the other hand, the appreciation of value is not shared between the salesperson and the customer representative. Value appreciation is a mental process in one's mind, a covert action within an individual. Therefore, the value space for value appreciation is *exclusive*. The value space is open only for the individual who is engaged in appreciation at the personal value level and is closed to other members of the dyad. In practical terms, the salesperson cannot enter the customer representative's value space for value appreciation. However, the salesperson can make interpretations of what kind of interaction-based value the customer representative might appreciate.

As for the process of value application, the personal, relational, and corporate levels can be approached as value spaces in relation to the dyadic setting. The personal level can be characterized as an *exclusive* value space. It is not open to the other member of the dyad. For example, the value application process of Wellbeing occurs at a personal level: after a successful sales call, the salesperson sleeps his nights better at his home, and the customer representative cannot go there. The personal context for the application of value is not shared between the salesperson and the customer representative. In a parallel fashion, the value application process of Becoming able to impress is applied at the personal level in the embedded context of the customer representative in his business role. The salesperson is not present when the customer representative impresses his superiors. Therefore, the value space for the application of Becoming able to impress is *exclusive* – it is only related to the other person of the dyad.

The relational level of value application takes place when the salesperson and the customer representative are interacting. The application of value at the relational level occurs within the temporal frame of the sales meeting when both the parties are present. Therefore, the value space for the embedded value contexts of Supporting, Making sense, and Progressing is *shared* between the dyadic members.

Based on the research results, the corporate level of value application does not occur within the temporal frame of the sales meeting. Value is applied at the corporate level outside the boundaries of the sales meeting. Therefore, the value space is *exclusive* in nature as it does not involve both parties of the dyad.

The understanding of value spaces and the unfolding of value is inspired by the formal grounded theory on status passages presented by Glaser and Strauss (1971). The authors aimed to understand the process of dying by attaching it to specific awareness contexts within which a person learns to be chronically ill. The construction of value spaces based on levels and contexts for the unfolding of value is illustrated in Figure 12.

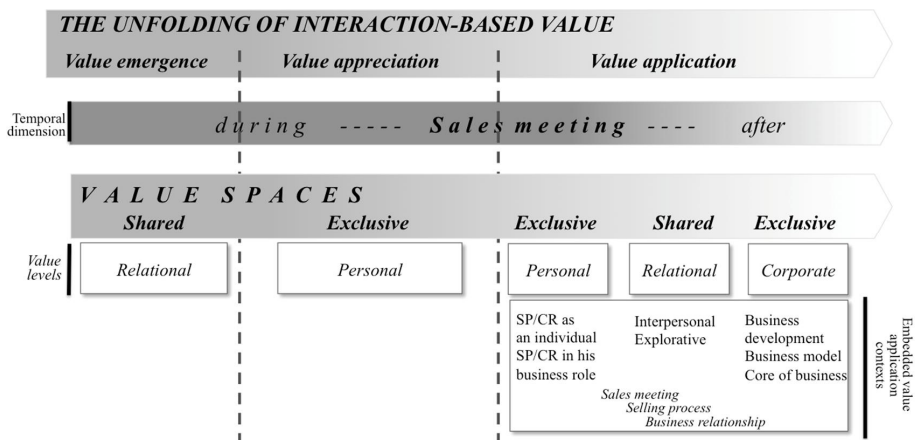


Figure 12 Value spaces, levels, and contexts in relation to the unfolding of interaction-based value.

The emergence of interaction-based value in sales interactions is a shared value space that occurs at the relational level (Figure 12). However, the appreciation of interaction-based value occurs at the personal level and involves only the individual as the appreciator. Value application processes may occur in both shared value spaces and exclusive value spaces. The salesperson cannot enter the value space where the customer representative applies interaction-based value at a personal level or at the corporate level and vice versa.

The unfolding of interaction-based value progresses through shared and exclusive value spaces. Eventually, through the process of value application, interaction-based value unfolds in particular value levels and embedded contexts that are relevant to sales interactions. Therefore, interaction-based

value does not solely remain within the boundaries of the sales meeting. Salespersons and customer representatives may act upon interaction-based value in various contexts and temporal frames. They may act upon interaction-based value within the minutes of a sales meeting or outside the boundaries of the sales meeting as the salespersons and customer representatives are interacting in other times and places and with other people and companies.

However, there are no clear boundaries dividing the value spaces, levels, and contexts. Their boundaries are ambiguous due to "the overwhelming nature of boundaryless, dynamic and multilevel process data" (Langley, 1999, 694). Therefore, the boxes with sharp lines in Figure 12 are used only for illustrative purposes.

The results of the study further indicate that value application in the shared value space at the relational level (see Figure 12) involves a temporarily extended dimension. Both the salesperson and the customer representative are engaged in this extended process as a dyad. Not only do the salesperson and the customer representative apply interaction-based value during the ongoing sales meeting, but they continue doing so at the relational level in forthcoming sales meetings throughout the same selling process. As the salesperson and the customer representative establish or continue a business relationship throughout the selling process, the sales meeting and the selling process are framed by a relationship. Specifically, the value application process of Supporting facilitates interaction during the ongoing sales meeting. However, the value application process of Progressing together links the particular sales meeting to the overall selling process and facilitates its continuation:

"I already look forward to the next meeting; it is not about having a one-shot attitude." (Fred, SP)

In addition, the value unfolding processes of, for example, Becoming convinced, and Becoming able to impress may strengthen the long-term relationship between the salesperson and the customer representative and their respective companies:

"As an additional flavor, there is this long acquaintance with the customer representative." (Fred, SP)

"Our cooperation has been on the right track since from the beginning." (Mary, SP)

"One needs to remember the customer even though the customer might have passive needs for the time being." (Allison, SP)

To sum up, interaction-based value unfolds along the subsequent processes of emergence, appreciation, and application. Moreover, interaction-based value unfolds through particular value spaces (exclusive or shared) and is

applied in specific value application levels and embedded contexts. Moreover, through value application processes in the shared value space, interaction-based value temporally extends beyond the sales meeting to the selling process and to the overall relationship. Therefore, not all value application processes are 'captivated' inside the boundaries of the sales meeting. Interaction-based value passes on from sales meetings to future sales meetings within the selling process and to the overall relationship and to other contexts of customer and partner networks. Via salespersons and customer representatives, interaction-based value is applied in personal, relational, and corporate contexts.

I want to emphasize that the constructed understanding of how individuals appreciate sales meetings is based on the salespersons' and customer representatives' views on individual sales meetings. At the time of the research interviews, the interviewees (except for one case) did not know whether the sales meeting they were referring to was a part of a successful selling process or not.

The constructed understanding is strongly informed by the premises of both symbolic interactionism and grounded theory methodology. Building on symbolic interactionist ideas, the emergence, appreciation, and application of interaction-based value can be understood as a "complex series of fluid transformations" (Rock 1979, 55). In line with the grounded theory roots of this study, the emergence, appreciation, and application of interaction-based value can be understood as a process that "occurs over time and involves change over time" (Glaser 1978, 97; see also Isabella, 1990). The unfolding of interaction-based value through value spaces is a continuum consisting of seamless actions.

6.3 Grounded theory: "Once again I gained so much"

The goal of grounded theory methodology is to capture essential features of the dynamic and processual nature of the empirical reality (Glaser and Strauss 1967). A finalized grounded theory covers variation in the data and shows patterns of actions in an unfolding way (Glaser 1978).

This study offers a substantive grounded theory on interaction-based value in the context of business-to-business sales meetings. In addition, I have termed the grounded theory with the following label: "Once again I gained so much". This label of the grounded theory is a quotation from an interview, expressed by a salesperson named Allison. The sentence incorporates the pivotal understanding of how individuals appreciate sales meetings. First, *once again* refers to Allison's experience that it is typical that one gains in relation to interaction in sales meetings. Second, *I gained* underscores the subjective

indication of value and the fact that – in general – one may gain in relation to sales meetings. Third, *so much* relates to the variety and number of gains that may emerge based on interpersonal interaction. Although the quotation was expressed by a salesperson, the same applies to customer representatives as is evident based on the four forms of interaction-based value and nine value application processes appointed by customer representatives. The grounded theory on interaction-based value is illustrated in Figure 13.

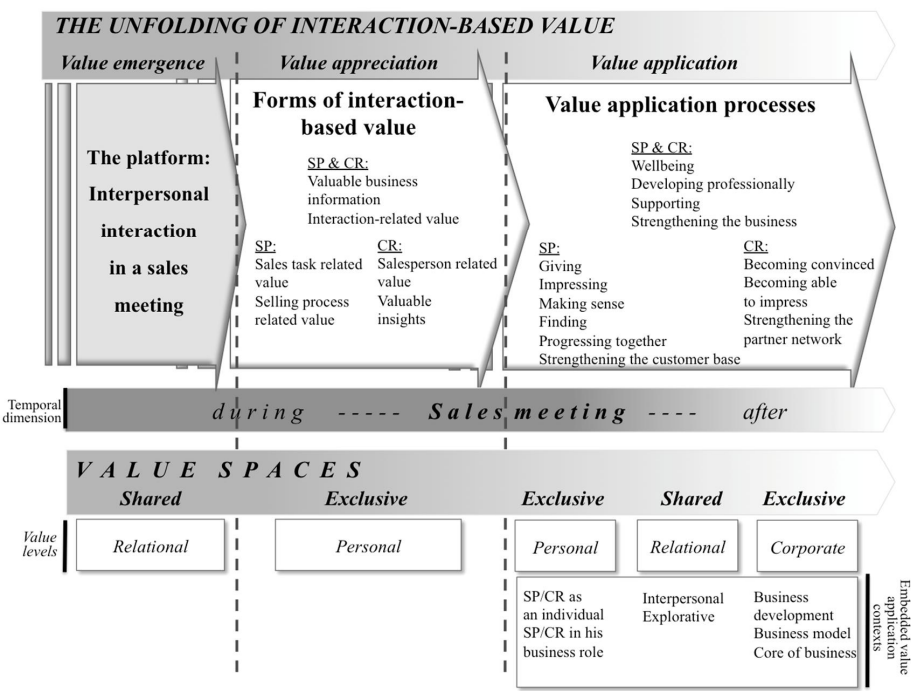


Figure 13 Grounded theory on interaction-based value: “Once again I gained so much”.

The grounded theory constructed in this study offers interaction-based value as unfolding through particular value spaces (Figure 13). The unfolding of interaction-based value comprises three interrelated processes (the emergence, appreciation, and application of interaction-based value) and the value spaces (shared and exclusive). Value spaces and the unfolding of interaction-based value can be regarded as heuristic stages. Heuristic stages are often implicit for the individuals involved in the empirical process but are made explicit by researchers for theoretical purposes (Glaser 1978). However, the stages are “perceivable because they sequence with one another within certain temporal limits” (Glaser 1978, 98).

More specifically, interaction-based value emerges on the basis of interpersonal interaction in a shared and relational context (see Figure 13). Value appreciation takes place in an exclusive context at a personal level and results in six forms of interaction-based value. Based on the dynamic and processual nature of interaction-based value, value is applied through 17 value application processes. When individuals engage in value application processes, they may guide their actions in various ways suitable for them (cf. Blumer 1969). These processes are applied either in exclusive or shared value spaces at personal, relational, and corporate levels and in specific embedded value application contexts. The data imply that value temporally extends to forthcoming sales meetings and the selling process and relationship in relation to the dyad as well as to the contexts of the respective companies and their customers and partner networks.

The two theoretical categories, the unfolding of interaction-based value and value spaces, have emerged based on theorizing upon the data – being occupied with raising the categories and processes up to a more abstract and theoretical level yet staying attached to empirical practice. The two theoretical categories integrate the theory and cut through the data (Charmaz 2006). In addition, they represent theoretical handles to the data, and the data can be understood by applying these theoretical handles upon it (Charmaz 2006).

The constructed grounded theory – “Once again I gained so much” – is the answer to the aim of the research: to offer a substantive grounded theory on the appreciation and application of interaction-based value in business-to-business sales meetings from the viewpoint of individuals.

7 DISCUSSION

This chapter summarizes the main theoretical and managerial contributions of the research. The purpose of the study was expressed as follows:

“...to understand how individuals appreciate sales meetings in the context of buying and selling of professional business-to-business services.”

The purpose was approached from the standpoint of three questions concerning the nature of interaction-based value, the application of interaction-based value, and the levels and contexts of the application of interaction-based value.

I have aimed to extend contemporary knowledge of personal selling and value research in general by studying value from a novel perspective: starting from the individual viewpoint and grounding the understanding on an empirical, qualitative perspective. Taking this extended view on value in personal selling, I have posed and answered a number of intriguing questions. In this chapter, I discuss the contributions this study offers. On the basis of the research results, I have constructed a grounded theory that incorporates conceptual language to understand the studied phenomenon. This study integrates value with the pre-transactional context of the selling process and offers a qualitative and subjective view on value as a processual and dynamic entity.

I continue the chapter by considering the managerial contributions the study offers. After evaluating the results and considering the limitations of the study, I conclude by suggesting avenues for future research.

7.1 Summary of research results

During the research interviews interviewees easily started describing the gains they had appreciated in relation to the sales meetings. I had presumed that it would be easy for the interviewees to describe their expectations for the meeting, but it turned out the other way around. Both salespersons and customer representatives were quite hesitant in listing their expectations. Sales meetings may be regarded as such routine activities that the participants simply join them by opening the door to the meeting room. However, based on

the interviews, it is not easy to book sales meetings in the first place, and thorough preparations ensure that the precious time is well spent.

As for the forms of interaction-based value, at first the interviewees seemed to offer rather heterogeneous descriptions. However, as I analyzed the descriptions throughout the research process, more homogenous overarching themes became apparent. The true essence of interpersonal interaction was present in the way salespersons and customer representatives appreciated interaction-related value. As business professionals, both the parties appreciated various forms of noteworthy business information. The other forms of interaction-based value underscore the participants differing roles in relation to the meeting. As the salesperson represents the selling company, he appreciates properties that are related to his present salestask as well as to the overall selling process as these gains help him to succeed in his work. As for the customer representative, he appreciates certain attributions related to the salesperson as part of the offering. Customer representatives also appreciate gaining crucial insights. Occasionally these insights represent problems for the selling companies as they are given to customer representatives for free, although they may not have been easy to obtain. However, in order to convince the customer's side that the salesperson and the selling company are worth consideration as business partners, the salesperson needs to demonstrate expertise in one way or another.

The most apparent difference between salespersons' and customer representatives' appreciations was related to how they approached the sales meeting in relation to other activities. For the salespersons, the sales meeting was part of a longer selling process. The sales meeting was situated within a continuum of activities that span a wide time scale. In contrast, the customer representatives approached the meeting according to a narrower time scale. For the customer representatives, the sales meeting was viewed as a separate entity with no clear connections to any temporal continuum. Customer representatives pop-in and pop-out of the flow of sales meetings, whereas salespersons engage themselves to a longitudinal process that comprises sales meetings and the selling process and relationship.

Although it was difficult for both the salespersons and customer representatives to assess the gains from the other person's perspective, the assessments were well in line with the actual appreciations. However, there was one exception. When the salespersons and customer representatives were assessing each other's gains, neither assumed the other to appreciate the interaction as such. However, both parties did actually appreciate mutual interaction. Perhaps good interaction is taken for granted or only considered when it fails. The hard professional facts that are present in the value forms of, for example, business information and important insights seem to trump the softer qualities

of human interaction. However, human-to-human interaction was appreciated by both the salespersons and customer representatives.

Based on the research results, the forms of interaction-based value offered leveraging points from which the salespersons and customer representatives could act upon interaction-based value in terms of any of the 17 identified ways. These value application processes occurred at the salesperson's own personal level, with the presence of the customer representative, or the selling company. The same levels were also identified from the customer representatives' side. The data also implied at the application of interaction-based value in the contexts of customer and partner networks.

Based on the results, sales meetings may positively affect a person's well-being. The meetings also make the salesperson content as he has the chance to help others in their work. As for the participants in their business roles, the salesperson appreciates being able to impress the customer representative and takes pride in representing his selling company. Salespersons appreciate understanding the buying company's challenges in-depth as it will advance the continuation of the selling process. Both the salespersons and customer representatives view the sales meetings as chances for professional development. The customer representatives appreciate becoming convinced of the performance of the salesperson and the selling company. Based on the results, the salesperson is viewed as a more important proof of performance than is the selling company. In the absence of concrete products and pre-made solutions, the salesperson becomes the embodiment of the offering. I was most surprised by the value application process of Becoming able to impress. Customer representatives appreciated the sales meetings as they enabled them to impress others in their company. This implies that customer representatives are also salespersons and spokespersons when they internally sell ideas to their peers and executives. In fact, during a sales meeting, the salesperson can prep the customer representative to sell.

At the relational level, both the participants appreciated the support they could offer in terms of the interaction going smoothly and in a constructive manner. A trusting atmosphere and a win-win feeling are characteristics of a sales meeting that is appreciated by both the salesperson and customer representative.

Sales meetings offered value processes that can be applied at the corporate level as well. The meetings offered information and insights that the parties could later apply in their business development projects. The salespersons also appreciated securing a steady flow of business and a growing number of customers. The customer representatives underscored the importance of their partner networks as a model for doing business. All selling companies are potential additions to a buying company's partner network.

Value emerges from the basis of interpersonal interaction. However, only one of the value application levels – relational – is related to both the salesperson and the customer representative, to the dyad. Other value application processes take place as external to the dyad; for example, the salesperson may apply interaction-based value on his way back to the office or at home, or the customer representative may develop the buying company's business without any dyadic activities with the salesperson or the selling company.

Customer representatives struggled with assessing how salespersons might act upon interaction-based value. On their behalf, salespersons were more ready to assess the customer representatives' viewpoints. This difference may be due to the differing roles the parties traditionally occupy in the meeting. In a sales situation, the customer representative is waiting to be understood, and the salesperson is the one doing the understanding. The dynamics of the meeting would turn upside down if the salesperson would expect the customer representative to go to great lengths to understand the salesperson. This viewpoint is also reflected in the way the salespersons and customer representatives approach cooperation during the sales meeting. Based on the results, the customer representatives appreciate 'receiving inputs' and do not consider the mutual cooperation with the salesperson that is often needed for the inputs to be realized. In contrast, the salespersons underscore working in tandem with the customer during the sales meeting. Salespersons appreciate finding a mutual map and making progress together.

In addition, customer representatives assumed the salespersons to appreciate the opportunity of making money in relation to the sales meeting. However, this theme was not appointed by the salespersons. The salespersons emphasized the continuation of a mutual process and did not bring up financial gains in their repertoire of appreciations.

To sum up, value emerges on the basis of interpersonal interaction that may seem commonplace and ordinary on the surface. Even the participating individuals themselves seemed to underestimate the gains the other participant and the individuals themselves perceived and used. The individuals were not able to reciprocally assess just how much value the other party had gained; value, that would nevertheless impact the ongoing meeting, further business decisions in relation to the selling process, the future of their business relationship as well as their professional lives when engaging with their colleagues, other companies and networks as well as their private lives as individuals.

These research results offered a firm basis for theorizing on the emergence, appreciation, and application of interaction-based value. I have constructed conceptual and theoretical categories as a result of theorizing. These categories constitute a conceptual language to depict the essence of the emergence, appreciation, and application of interaction-based value at an abstract and

theoretical level. The conceptual language describes the unfolding of interaction-based value through value spaces. The concepts and their relationships constitute the grounded theory on interaction-based value (Figure 14).

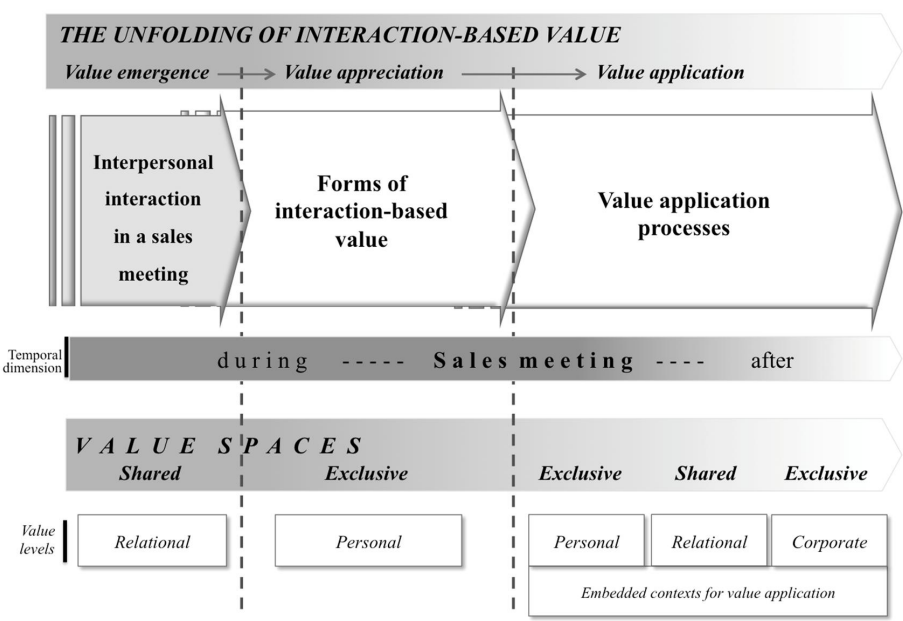


Figure 14 Grounded theory on interaction-based value.

Interaction-based value unfolds through particular value spaces (Figure 14). The unfolding of interaction-based value progresses through shared and exclusive value spaces and cuts through the emergence, appreciation, and application of interaction-based value. The unfolding of interaction-based value extends from the specific sales meeting both temporally and contextually.

The unfolding of interaction-based value comprises the subsequent processes of value emergence, value appreciation, and value application. Moreover, the unfolding of interaction-based value occupies particular spaces, levels, and embedded contexts in the dyadic sales setting.

The emergence of interaction-based value takes place in the shared value space between the salesperson and customer representative at a relational level. The appreciation of interaction-based value occurs in the exclusive value space at the personal level. On the other hand, the application of interaction-based value takes places in three different combinations. First, interaction-based value may be applied in the exclusive space at the personal level – more precisely in the embedded context of either salesperson/customer

representative as an individual or salesperson/customer representative in his business role. Second, interaction-based value may be applied in the shared value space at the relational level in the embedded contexts of interpersonal or inter-firm cooperation. This specific level is temporally extended from the particular sales meeting to future sales meetings throughout the selling process and to the overall business relationship. Third, interaction-based value may also be applied in exclusive value spaces at the corporate level in the embedded contexts of business development, core of business, and business model. Based on the results, value emergence and value appreciation take place during the sales meeting either in the shared or exclusive context. Value application may take place during the meeting or after the meeting. Value application may occur in a shared value space between the dyadic parties, or it may occupy an exclusive value space and occur at the personal value level or corporate value level. The data also indicate that interaction-based value extends to the contexts of customer and partner networks.

When individuals appoint an object as appreciable, the individuals give meaning to the object as interaction-based value. Six forms of interaction-based value were identified based on the data: Interaction-related value and Valuable business information, which were common to both parties; Salesperson-related value and Selling process-related value, which was specific to the salespersons; and Salesperson-related value and Valuable insights, which were specific to the customer representatives. Each form of interaction-based value comprises particular value properties. During the process of value application, the appreciator of interaction-based value – the salesperson or the customer representative – may guide his actions and act upon interaction-based value through various value application processes. Altogether, 17 value application processes were identified in the study. Four of the value application processes are common to both the salespersons and customer representatives: Wellbeing, Developing professionally, Supporting, and Strengthening the business. In addition, six of the value application processes were appreciated by the salespersons: Giving, Impressing, Making sense, Finding, and Strengthening the customer base. On their behalf, customer representatives appointed three additional value application processes: Becoming able to impress, Becoming convinced, and Strengthening the partner network.

Interaction-based value is processual as it progresses through the subsequent processes of value emergence, appreciation, and application. Interaction-based value is also dynamic in nature as it evolves and becomes meaningful for the individuals through the processes of emergence, appreciation, and application.

7.2 Theoretical implications

This study has examined value from the viewpoint of individuals in relation to sales meetings. I have followed the definition of value as “a subjective, appreciative interpretation of an object” (Jokiniemi and Halinen, 2012) that underscores the viewpoint of the salesperson and the customer representative as individuals. The study has extended the understanding on value in sales research and in value research within the discipline of marketing in a holistic manner by adopting a qualitative, subjective, dynamic, and processual view on value in the pre-transactional context of the selling process. I will now consider these perspectives on the basis of the findings in this study.

This study has identified interaction-based value and value application processes in relation to sales meetings in the pre-transactional context. Therefore, this study complements the long-standing notion in sales research that the final outcomes of sales pipelines equal for the value of selling (e.g. Anderson and Oliver, 1987; Walker et al., 1979). The traditional perspective regards value as evident only in a post-transactional context after a successful selling process. However, interaction-based value may also emerge and be appreciated and applied in the pre-transactional context. In the words of service-dominant logic, value-in-use (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) may emerge for the individual already in the pre-transactional phase of a selling process. This broadens the value focus in sales research as well as in value research in general to acknowledge value that emerges even during the selling processes in addition to the final outcomes of the selling processes. Besides emerging, value can be readily used by the perceiving individuals already in the pre-transactional context. Thus, the renewed perspective challenges the traditional sales output and impact metrics of selling processes, for example, sales volume, cost/sales ratio, and sales per account category (Anderson and Oliver, 1987; Jackson et al., 2010) with a new evaluation dimension as well as enwidens the scope of value research.

Based on the findings of the study, value in relation to selling processes is qualitative in addition to the prevailing quantitative emphasis (Jackson et al., 2010). This study has offered six forms of interaction-based value as well as 17 value application processes. Particularly in the professional services context, the basis for these ‘value entities’ is interpersonal interaction. In comparison, the quantitative outcomes of the selling processes are mainly based on products and services. All these identified ‘value entities’ are qualitative in nature and as they are empirically challenged, they offer further insights and understanding for the dominantly abstract and theoretical value research.

This study has approached value as a subjectively indicated entity instead of objectively defining it. This approach has allowed the individuals' opinions to be heard as no one but the individual himself knows what he thinks is of value for him and what is not (cf. Blumer 1969). Based on the findings of this study, both the salesperson and the customer representative appoint value in relation to the sales meeting. They perceive forms of value in relation to themselves, to the interacting dyad, and to their respective firms. Therefore, this study indicates that salespersons as well as customer representatives become beneficiaries after appreciating and applying interaction-based value. In prior sales studies, the salesperson has not been empirically scrutinized as a beneficiary. Rather, the role of the salesperson has been considered as someone who enables others to become beneficiaries. Objective value determination, together with subjective value indications, offers a richer view on value in relation to selling and on understanding both aggregated and individual views on value.

In terms of value research, this study has shown that value can be scrutinized as an independent phenomenon. The interviewed individuals did not interlink, compare, or make calculations between inputs and forms of value in relation to a particular sales meeting. The forms of interaction-based value and the accompanying value application processes were entirely based on value as such – and not diminished or reduced by sacrifices. However, contemporary compensatory thinking regards value as perceived value or a net benefit. The insights offered by the compensatory model, together with the perspective of value as such, as a phenomenon in its own right, offer a rich understanding of value.

Value can be understood as a dynamic and processual entity as opposed to a static outcome. Interaction-based value is dynamic as it transforms in the process of emergence, appreciation, and application. Interaction-based value evolves in the process of unfolding as individuals guide their actions and act upon value in a way that is suitable for them. Moreover, the processual nature of interaction-based value offers an understanding of how success at the interpersonal level is related to success at the company level (cf. Berthon and John 2006; Celuch et al., 2006; Wilson and Jantrania, 1995). When salespersons apply interaction-based value, they eventually link value from the sales interaction to themselves as persons at the personal level, to the dyadic level, and to the level of their companies. The same applies for the customer representatives' side. Interaction-based value does not only stay within the boundaries of the sales meeting but stretches to other times and places as well.

"A good sales process always creates value for the sales organization. ... Perhaps the most tangible benefit of a [sales] process approach for many organizations, especially for those whose

sales is consultative, is that process shifts the value from the individual to the institution. That's a shift that would benefit many organizations (Rackham and DeVincentis 1999, 219)".

Sales meetings as contexts for the emergence of interaction-based value have not been previously studied as independent sources for value emergence; the value related to sales meetings has been generally superseded by the final outcomes of selling processes. In contrast, the grounded theory offered in this study is temporally situated in the pre-transactional context of the selling process and focuses on the sales meetings. This study demonstrates that value may emerge and be acted upon during the pre-transactional phase of the selling process. Value emergence, appreciation, and application are not dependent on the completion of the selling process – value is readily applicable right here and now based on one single sales meeting. Although the participants in a business meeting have been brought together by the possibility of solving a business challenge together, value may emerge regardless of whether the parties ever find a mutual solution and sign an agreement. The emergence, appreciation, and application of interaction-based value are therefore not dependent on the completion of the entire selling process.

There is a lot to be gained based on one single sales meeting, although the final result of the selling process is still pending. As Kale and Barnes (1992, 123) point out, “regardless of the outcome, every encounter adds to the seller’s repertoire of experiences, skills, strategies, and alternative transmission approaches”. Some of the gains may be shared during the ongoing meeting, later on in the selling process or the following year as the business relationship progresses. However, some of the gains based on a particular sales meeting may be applied only by the other participant in his own settings. For example, the salesperson may enjoy some gains as a business professional or as an individual in his own context. Or he may apply the gains with his colleagues, with other customers or within other business networks and thus not including the customer representative or the buying company while applying the value. This also underscores that a sales meeting is not an atomistic and static unit in time. A sales meeting becomes intertwined with other activities and processes via the individuals who participate in the meeting.

The participants of business meetings may be regarded as integral points of departure for interaction-based value to be eventually applied for the benefit of the selling companies. This change of perspective moves the sales discipline into the realm of a broader value-based way of thinking and underscores the strategic role of the salesforce. Thus, sales management is challenged to acknowledge the wide-ranging impact of a single sales meeting and to broaden their horizons from the end of the sales pipeline to cover the full business landscape.

According to Sheth and Sharma (2008), salespersons represent the embodiment of service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). This notion characterizes salespersons in the role of facilitating the emergence of value through specialized skills and knowledge in a relationship context. In line with service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), the focus of salesforce activities is shifting “from products to intangible resources, the co-creation of value, and relationships” (Sheth and Sharma, 2008, 261). The new context of personal selling demands salespersons who are skillful, knowledgeable, and motivated general managers who coordinate diverse resource networks to bring about value for the customers (Sheth and Sharma, 2008). Salespersons are no longer simply persuasion agents and spokespersons for their companies’ products; the shift toward solution sales highlights the role of the salespersonnel as education agents and consultants for the buying company (Sheth and Sharma, 2008). The salespersonnel is challenged to view customer relationships at a strategic level, to invent the offering on an ongoing basis, and to ascertain the profitability of a customer’s business (Williams et al., 2009).

With the threat and possibility of salesforce automation and the salesperson’s deteriorating role as a mere information provider as “a talking brochure” (Rackham and DeVinentis 1999, 44), salespersons are challenged to take on new tasks in their roles. However, although the contexts and levels for selling may change, salespersons continue to possess one specific, precious asset: they are human beings. This is exhaustively portrayed by Anderson (1996, 30): “High technology can never fully replace the salesperson’s ability to establish trust with customers, respond to subtle cues, anticipate customer needs, provide personalized service, nurture ongoing relationships, and create profitable new business strategies in partnership with customers”.

7.3 Managerial implications

The findings of this study suggest new perspectives for thinking about the value of personal selling and of sales meetings in particular. The selling company can enable its salespersonnel to succeed with the help of the sales management and supervisors. Supervisors can coach and support salespersons as individuals and as a group to be more aware of the many possibilities for value emergence, appreciation, and application. Moreover, the selling company may conceptualize its sales meetings in order to ensure the emergence of interaction-based value is in line with the strategy of the company.

High-quality coaching is a pivotal means for positively affecting salespersons’ performance. Supervisors play a key role in facilitating the salespersons in paying attention to interaction-based value. Implicit gains can be made

explicit by the supervisor with, for example, the following questions: *“What did you gain from the meeting? Was the customer impressed; can he sell the product to others in the buying company? Did the meeting enhance your professional growth? How does the meeting help you to tackle the next meeting?”* Supervisors may also highlight the ways in which the salesperson may apply the interaction-based value at the corporate level. Supervisors can encourage salespersons to share their insights with colleagues, readily suggest new ideas to be developed into novel offerings, and spread their ideas amongst the clientele.

Supervisors may apply various practical sales training methods when involving the whole sales organization in the understanding and application of interaction-based value. In addition to individual coaching sessions, teams of salespersons may train in perspective-taking by role-playing; salespersons may take turns in playing the customer representative and playing the salesperson and reflecting over the ‘play’ afterwards. Experiential exercises may bring the topic of interaction-based value close to the everyday lives of salespersons and arouse interest in sharing insights with colleagues regarding novel way of approaching sales meetings, customer representatives, and the mutual interaction.

Selling companies may also model and conceptualize an ideal sales meeting by outlining the activities prior to the meeting, during the meeting, and after the meeting including the participants’ shared and exclusive viewpoints and contexts. The model may underscore, for example, the importance of analyzing one’s own and the other person’s expectations toward the meeting and making more thorough preparations for the meeting. During sales meetings, salespersons are encouraged to pay attention to their perspective-taking abilities in order to perceive subtle cues and dynamics in relation to the interpersonal interaction. Even seemingly ordinary sales meetings allow the salesperson to pay attention to, for example, Wellbeing, Impressing and Becoming impressed as well as Supporting, which are appreciated by both the salespersons and the customer representatives. Moreover, during the sales meeting, the salesperson has the opportunity to coach the customer representative to become an even better promoter and seller for the salesperson’s and customer representative’s mutual cause to the customer representative’s internal customers. The salesperson is in a position to help the customer representative to succeed in selling. Overall, salespersons are in a position to leave various positive mental footprints on customer representatives and vice versa.

Based on the research interviews, it seems that few people actively and explicitly reflect upon meetings, although the meetings are appreciated by every interviewed individual. This notion is supported by the following extracts from the research interviews:

"From my personal viewpoint? Well, I think...I have never thought about it from that angle..." (Christopher, CR)

"I think it is nice in the middle of normal rhythm and daily life to notice that an awful lot of various things are related to interactions with customers." (Fred, SP)

Reflection time is important for professional development and for a person's overall wellbeing. This reflection time may be shared with and facilitated by the supervisor, a mentor, or peers.

As even a routine meeting may turn the customer representative, the salesperson, the buying company, and the selling company into beneficiaries of interaction-based value, the significance of various kinds of interaction opportunities should not be underestimated. Companies have been keen on capturing value at the end of the selling process and simultaneously ignoring the value emerging in readily usable forms already during the selling process. Selling companies should take each and every contact seriously (Bhagat, 2009) and find new ways to evaluate, support, and build on the value that emerges and is appreciated in relation to sales meetings. Moreover, as even routine-like sales meetings have the power to turn customer representatives and salespersons into beneficiaries of value, should sales meetings be treated as corporate assets?

7.4 Evaluating the results of the study

Charmaz (2006) has offered four criteria for evaluating a constructivist grounded theory: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness (see also Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008; Glaser 1978). *Credibility* points to the familiarity of the researcher with the context of the study, to rich data to support claims made about the data, and to a consistent and systematic analysis of the construction of categories and the relationships between the categories and the data. *Originality* is related to the degree of how much the grounded theory challenges and refreshes contemporary understanding of the topic – whether the theory offers a new understanding and extends current ideas. *Resonance* is related to the data and to people who share the same context with the research participants: does the theory make sense to other individuals who occupy similar roles as the individuals who participated in the study? Finally, the *usefulness* of a grounded theory is evaluated based on its applicability in practice, its contribution to knowledge, and its usability as a basis for a formal grounded theory. When a grounded theory meets these four criteria, it provides an analytic impact and well-grounded argumentation for its claims (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008).

I will now evaluate the grounded theory constructed in this study based on the four criteria – credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness – offered by Charmaz (2006).

As a researcher, I am very much familiar with the studied context that resonates to the *credibility* aspect. My work as an HR Development Manager offers me continuous access to sales meetings with service providers. In addition to being familiar with being in the role of a buyer, I have also studied in-depth the role of the salesperson and customer representative in practice. My previous work as a CRM Manager focused on ensuring that the Key Account Managers selling financial services to industrial customers were equipped with the tools and insights to succeed in their work. I am also actively involved with networks of HR professionals, which provides me with the opportunity to share experiences in buying, selling, and executing HR projects.

In addition, the data I have collected for this study are versatile. The audio-recorded sales meetings, individual interviews, validating interviews, and all other generated material (sales meeting summaries, field notes, analytical memos) offer extensive coverage of and differing perspectives on the studied phenomenon.

The decision to include two groups in the study – the salespersons and the customer representatives – to describe a specific sales meeting has proven to function well. The two groups have created the opportunity for constant comparison between the groups (and also within the groups) and to understand the appreciation of a sales meeting from both sides of the table. The reciprocal assessments (the salesperson assessing what the customer representative gained and vice versa) have offered additional insights into constructing an understanding of the studied area.

As for the process of analyzing the data, I have aimed at providing a transparent and exhaustive description. The process of constructing the categories is comprehensively described as are their relationships. In the manuscript, I have included several authentic interview quotations in relation to each category. The authentic comments have helped me – and hopefully the reader as well – to see the solid links between the data and the resulting categories, and eventually the arguments for the data. The categories have remained strongly connected with the data, while I have moved towards a more abstract level in constructing the theory.

Turning to *originality*, based on my search strategies, there are no studies in sales research focusing on how individuals appreciate sales meetings as such in business-to-business contexts. Although the concept of value has been eagerly discussed, it has remained as an empirically under-developed entity. Therefore, the time was ripe for an exploratory study. By going to the grass-roots level, to the actual sales meetings, I have been able to construct an

understanding of how individuals appreciate sales meetings. This understanding is based on a dyadic view as it involves both the salespersons' and the customer representatives' perspectives.

The results offer a subjective perspective on value as a process phenomenon that is present in the pre-transactional context and unfolds via individuals even to the level of companies. This is a novel perspective as traditionally in sales research, value is considered as a static outcome that is objectively determined in dominantly quantitative measures in the post-transactional context. The incorporation of symbolic interactionism and a qualitative research approach have enabled a broadening of the prevailing tendency towards quantitative studies based on social exchange theory.

The novel conceptual terminology that represents the grounded theory in this study offers a fresh view on sales meetings in general and on the emergence, appreciation, and application of interaction-based value in particular. The central elements of the grounded theory shed new light on the impact and possibilities a single sales meeting can offer for individuals, for members of the selling process, and for companies. Thus, this exploratory study sets the scene for further research to extend our knowledge on how individuals appreciate various interactions in business.

I will now elaborate on *resonance*. The following extract is selected from one research interview. Not only does the extract underscore the rich answers of the interviewed business professionals, but it also highlights the importance of taking time to reflect on interactions, even in the midst of hectic business life:

"When you think about the meaning of things ... things become clearer, and when you take the view like what did I actually gain, this is an enormously important reflection. You can think that one can improve interaction skills and sales skills, but in some ways it is important to – through this kind of a discussion – to understand the meaning and importance of a sales meeting because then you think at another level. I am really excited after these questions, that you get, things start coming into your mind about the whole issue of sales meetings." (Bob, SP)

All throughout the research process, I have challenged various aspects of the study with business professionals from various companies. In general, people have been inspired by the fact that somebody is interested in finding out the value of sales meetings. The preliminary ideas and insights of the study have resonated well with business professionals. In addition, at the end of each research interview, I briefly discussed my findings so far with the interviewee. Not once did the interviewee object to my findings; instead, they usually wanted to share some of their own experiences in relation to the findings. The

topic was originally proven to be of interest with the enthusiastic reception of the CEOs and Senior Consultants I contacted while attempting to access sales meetings.

Am I offering an overly positive portrayal of sales meetings? Do they always involve 17 value application processes? I have indeed asked the interviewees about their gains in relation to a specific meeting. However, I have also asked them about gains that they did not achieve or other things that may have hindered successful interaction during the meeting. The respondents were quite puzzled with these questions. A few of the customer representatives mentioned that there was no agenda for the meeting, and some salespersons mentioned that the meeting did not immediately lead to anything new. However, all the respondents who appointed some gains that they did not attain were able to list various gains they did in fact attain. Moreover, during the research interviews, the respondents did not interlink things-gained and things-not-gained. Things they did not gain did not reduce the 'gross' value of the things-gained.

Moreover, none of the sales meetings was a flop or a total disaster, although they do occur. The majority of sales meetings, based on my practitioner's experience, are on the positive side. To challenge the positive tone of the results, I included validating interviews in relation to unsuccessful meetings to validate the emergent understanding. Moreover, the unsuccessful sales meetings were sources for the interaction-based value processes of Supporting and Developing professionally. From a reversed point of view, the validating interviews underscored aspects that were missing in those meetings but that would have been appreciated by the customer representatives. These missing gains are amongst the gains that were appreciated in relation to the more successful meetings.

Usefulness can be approached from applicability in practice, contribution to knowledge, and usability for building a formal grounded theory. First, as the grounded theory offers a framework for understanding how individuals appreciate sales meetings, it also serves as a map for, for example, sales managers coaching their salespersons. In order to ensure and facilitate the emergence, appreciation, and application of value for both customer representatives and salespersons, sales managers may discuss with their salespersons and point to the different elements, phases, and contexts in relation to value emergence, appreciation, and application. Moreover, the grounded theory offered points to sales meetings as sources of value that is an addition to the contemporary evaluation of selling processes. Value may emerge and be applied even during the selling process, not only at the end. This extends the contemporary tools for measuring sales performance.

Second, the theory contributes to knowledge in several ways. The theory offers both a detailed and a concise form of the dynamic nature of subjectively appreciated value in relation to individual sales meetings. The theory offers contexts through which value unfolds along a three-step process. Moreover, the theory points to several potential and actual spaces, levels, and embedded contexts where value is applied. I have complemented the prevailing understanding by building on symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Mead 1932). The perspective of symbolic interactionism has enabled me to start from the individual viewpoint and to approach the phenomenon from a subjective perspective. I have used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) as a qualitative method to ground the emerging understanding in the empirical reality and to grasp the processes that relate the individual to interaction-based value. The research design has aided in building an in-depth understanding from the viewpoint of individuals and their interpersonal interaction and has opened up the possibility of tapping into previously unfound elements related to interaction (Celuch et al., 2006). The design has also allowed me to focus on the processual nature of value and the accompanying covert processes (Woodruff and Flint, 2006).

Third, the substantive grounded theory constructed in this study has aimed for clear expression. Therefore, the substantive grounded theory offered in this study may serve a solid basis for building a formal grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Wilson and Hutchinson, 1996). A way toward a formal theory involves challenging the substantive theory by broadening the areas of study (Charmaz 2006). I have based my study on the selling of HRD services. In this context service as an abstract element is related to intensive interpersonal interaction in sales meetings. However, also concrete products are often related with intensive interpersonal interaction in sales meetings. In general, interpersonal interaction is present in every face-to-face sales meeting regardless of the level of abstractness or concreteness of the offering or a combination of both abstract and concrete elements. Therefore, the substantive grounded theory and its concepts could be challenged and further developed in product-based settings in the manufacturing industries. By widening the scope of the sales settings in this manner, the substantive theory can be developed towards a formal grounded theory. Thus, the contribution of the substantive grounded theory may not be limited only to professional services settings but may help to enlighten various kinds of sales meetings as well. Even in traditional manufacturing industries the price of the product and product characteristics alone do not often solely determine a successful sale and an accompanying business relationship. Therefore the decisive elements may lie in understanding the related interpersonal interaction in more depth.

7.5 Limitations and implications for further research

As with all research projects, this project has its limitations. Nowadays, team selling characterizes business-to-business markets (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005; Storbacka et al., 2009). In contrast, I have predominantly examined sales meetings from the viewpoint of one salesperson and one customer representative. Also, the majority of the dyads included in the research include only one salesperson and one customer representative. Therefore, sales teams are not addressed in this research, although they represent a contemporary means of selling.

The dyadic research setting would have implied at scrutinizing the viewpoint of the customer representative in more detail. However, I have chosen to focus on the sales literature and have predominantly adopted the viewpoint of the salesperson. In other words, in line with constructivist grounded theory guidelines, I have first constructed a grounded theory that is based on empirical data involving a dyadic perspective (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). I have then applied and challenged the constructed grounded theory with related sales research and scrutinized the theory's central concepts from the viewpoint of the salesperson and the selling organization (Chapters 3, 6, and 7). An interesting and likely avenue for further research is to consider the constructed grounded theory and its relationships to related purchasing research and to scrutinize the theory from the viewpoint of the customer representative and the buying organization.

As for methodological considerations, theoretical sampling was not completely applied. For practical reasons, I needed to collect as many sales meetings as I could in a rather short amount of time. Therefore, I was not able to select a forthcoming sales meeting based on the prior sales meeting's content and my growing understanding. However, the collected data are rich in detail and the categories were eventually theoretically saturated.

A grounded theory accounts for and frames the studied research area. The methodology does not require the researcher to know everything in the area nor to offer a perfect fact-based description of the studied action based on a large number of cases (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Not surprisingly, grounded theory studies have been criticized in two different ways for their inadequate capacity of arriving at a theory: first, grounded theory studies are not supported by accurate evidence, and second, grounded theory studies are not backed up by verified hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Goulding, 2009). The aforementioned "twin critiques" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 28) fail to acknowledge the aim of grounded theory, which is the generation of theory. A freshly generated theory is flexible and can be subsequently modified based on further evidence and testing; "a theory's only replacement is a better theory"

(Glaser and Strauss 1967, 28 building on Kuhn 1962). A grounded theory that meets its evaluation criteria (Charmaz 2006) offers a solid ground for further theoretical and empirical development.

An avenue for further research is the renewal of sales evaluation metrics. How does a company evaluate value emergence, appreciation, and application? The sales function's strategic importance and role in relation to interaction-based value challenges the traditional way of measuring the effectiveness of a sales organization (Cravens 2011). According to Anderson and Oliver (1987), in a best-case scenario, a performance control system increases the welfare for the salesperson and for the company. What kind of sales evaluation captures value application in a way that increases the wellbeing of the salesperson? Sales managers will need to broaden their mind-set and framework of salesforce performance metrics, evaluation, and compensation if they aim to capture the full advantage and promise of the salesforce's strategically important role in the emergence, appreciation, and application of value. As Plouffe et al. (2013) note, the management and psychology literature, and especially the subjective value inventory (SVI), could offer a framework for constructing a broader understanding of the variety of negotiations outcomes. SVI points to outcomes that are related to the participants' appreciation of the process of negotiation, the outcome of the negotiations, feelings of one's own performance, and the future relationship with the other party (Curhan, Elfenbein and Kilduff, 2009).

Interaction-based value may also be understood from new dimensions and processes if examined on the level of selling teams (Jones, Dixon, Chonko and Cannon, 2005). Furthermore, the individual-to-group perspective – the context of a customer representative and a sales team – may offer new viewpoints (Niculescu et al., 2013).

The overall research emphasis on emotions in marketing (e.g. Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999; Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha and Sheng, 2011) offers interesting leads for broadening understanding in relation to emotional intelligence and interaction-based value. Emotional contagion (Verbeke, 1997), emotional intelligence and the creativity of the salesperson (Lassk and Shepherd, 2013), the relationship between psychological ethical climate and customer value delivery (Schwepker, 2013) as well as emotional labor in relation to service roles (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Groth, Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2009) may offer further perspectives and enrich our understanding of the interaction between salespersons and customer representatives in sales meetings. A parallel topic is workplace spirituality in a selling organization as offered by Badrinarayanan and Madhavaram (2008). Approaching salespersons as individuals whose inner life is nourished in the working context

(Badrinarayanan and Madhavaram, 2008) may broaden the understanding of interaction-based value and its emergence, appreciation, and application.

In addition, the personal benefitting context is directly related to the identity of the individual as a salesperson. The changes in a person's sales identity in relation to unfolding value processes may be examined through an identity management strategy based on social identity theory (Pullins, Mallin, Buehrer and Jones, 2011; Steward, Hutt, Walker and Kumar, 2009; Vachhani, 2006).

*“Drop a pebble in the water: in a minute you forget,
But there's little waves a-flowing, and there's ripples circling yet,
And those little waves a-flowing to a great big wave have grown;
You've disturbed a mighty river just by dropping in a stone.”*
(James W. Foley; verses 5–8)

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Appendix 1: Introduction letter to the interviewees (January 2011)

Thank you for participating in this dissertation study!

Your role and perspective as a seller or buyer of professional services plays a central position in this study. Your participation and insights enable academic research to uncover the various elements related to sales meetings of professional services more broadly and deeply. Therefore, your input is important as it increases academic knowledge and, more generally, aids in the understanding of strategic business decisions and operative concepts.

This information letter provides you with essential information regarding your participation. Please do not hesitate to contact the researcher in case you have remaining questions.

The collection of research data and the participants

For my dissertation, I am gathering data related to sales meetings. The sales meeting may involve one or more salespersons and one or more customer representatives. The sales meeting must take place prior to the customer making a purchasing decision.

Data are collected from one meeting between a salesperson and a customer representative in three stages:

- 1) The sales meeting involving the salesperson and the customer representative will be audio recorded (the salesperson is in charge of audio recording the discussion using a digital audio recorder; the researcher does not participate the meeting).

- 2) Individual interviews of customer representatives will take place within one week of the meeting. The researcher will conduct the interviews and audio record each interview; the length will be approximately one hour.

- 3) Individual interviews of salespersons will occur within one week of the meeting. The researcher will conduct the interviews and audio record each interview; the length will be approximately one hour.

Confidentiality

The data will be collected, analyzed, and reported with uncompromising confidentiality. The researcher will handle and store the above-mentioned audio recordings and transcripts with care and will not share them with others. The researcher will not hand over the recordings or transcripts to any party, including the selling companies and buying companies participating in this study. The selling companies participating in this study are not informed as to which other companies are participating in the study. The buying companies

participating in this study are not informed as to which other companies are participating in the study.

Anonymity

Some reports and articles may be published during the research process. These publications, together with the dissertation, are public documents. In these documents, the original names of the participating companies are replaced with codes (e.g. Company F); likewise, the names of the individuals participating in the study are replaced with codes (Salesperson 1, Customer representative 4).

The nature of the information in publications

Single, authentic quoted sentences may be presented in the dissertation. In general, the recordings and transcripts are used in a summary fashion.

Examples of potential single, authentic quotations in the dissertation (the dissertation will be written in English; therefore, every sentence from the original transcripts will be translated into English) are as follows:

- According to Buyer 3: "Well, when we discussed our challenges with Salesperson 3, I got the impression that we are going in the right direction."
- ...this is evident in the answer given by Buyer 5: "Hmm, it is interesting how one realizes new things when one expresses them aloud and starts figuring out them together with an expert."

Facts and numbers related to business operations may be discussed during the sales meetings or during research interviews. However, these details will not be brought up in the dissertation. The researcher is interested in the interaction between the salesperson and customer representative during the sales meeting, not in the content of the discussions themselves.

Company report for participating companies

During fall 2011, a consultant-style report will be prepared based on the material collected for the dissertation. The report will follow the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. The report will be identical in content for every party participating in the research (selling companies and buying companies). When the participating companies so wish, the report will be delivered to them, and the researcher will be ready to present the report in a company meeting. The report is confidential among the companies participating in the study, and it is not allowed to provide the report to outside parties.

From the company report, a participating company obtains benchmarking information on other (anonymous) companies operating in the field. The report also offers an opportunity to learn and analyze what goes through

salespersons' and customer representatives' minds prior to the sales meeting, how a sales meeting is experienced, and in what ways sales meetings are beneficial for both parties.

Thank you for your input in making this dissertation a successful one!

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

(Salesperson/Customer representative)

Background information

- Name / Title / Age
- How long have you been doing this kind of work? How much (selling) experience do you have in this position?
- Basic information about the company
- How often are you involved in sales meetings?
- Has your company been previously cooperating with the other company?
- Has your company or you personally been cooperating with the specific customer representative?

About the sales meeting

- What led to the meeting?

Expectations prior to the meeting

- What did you expect to gain in relation to the meeting? Could you provide more details on each?
- Did you make preparations (inputs) or prepare yourself for the meeting in some way?
- What did the other person expect to gain in relation to the meeting? Could you provide more details on each?
- Did the other person make preparations before the meeting?

The meeting itself

- Please describe the main phases and themes of the meeting

Gains in relation to the meeting

- What did you gain during or in relation to the specific meeting? What kinds of things were fruitful and supported the meeting?
- What makes you mention that gain? Why is the gain important to you? In what ways? Is something possible that wasn't before now that you have appointed the gain? Will you do something with the gains?
- Was there something that was missing – something you expected to gain but did not?
- Were there some issues causing friction or slowing down the flow of the meeting?
- What kind of inputs/contribution did you give to the meeting during the meeting?
- What did the other person gain during or in relation to the specific meeting?

- What was important to the other person? In what ways? What kinds of things were fruitful and supported the meeting from the other person's perspective?
- Was there something that was missing – something the other person expected to gain but did not?
- Were there some issues causing friction or slowing down the flow of the meeting from the other person's perspective?
- What kind of inputs/contribution did the other person make to the meeting during the meeting?

Future

- How would you like things to continue from now on?

The meeting summary

- "I have listened through the audio-recorded conversation of the specific sales meeting. Here is a summary of all the main points that were discussed during the meeting. Kindly read through the list and, when you are ready, I will ask a couple of short questions. --- Based on your reading, are there any gains that come to your mind now that you did not recall earlier in the interview? Would you like to highlight some really important gains from the list or is it a combination of all the listed things?"

Reflection

- What are your thoughts about this interview? What kind of an experience was it for you?

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